

POLYGAMY and the Rise and Demise of the AZTEC EMPIRE



ROSS HASSIG

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of the Aztec Empire

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UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS • ALBUQUERQUE

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Printed in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 16 1 2 3 4 5 6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hassig, Ross, 1945– author.

Title: Polygamy and the rise and demise of the Aztec empire / Ross Hassig.

Description: Albuquerque : University of New Mexico Press, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015036864 | ISBN 9780826357113 (cloth : alk. paper) |

ISBN 9780826357120 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780826357137 (electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: Aztecs—Social life and customs. | Indians of Mexico—Social life and customs. | Polygamy—Political aspects—Mexico—History—To 1500.

Classification: LCC F1219.76.S64 H37 2016 | DDC 972—dc23 LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015036864>

Cover illustration courtesy of the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris,
Codex Telleriano-Remensis.

Designed by Lisa Tremaine
Composed in Cone & Carter Galliard

For Susan, then and now

CONTENTS

	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
	INTRODUCTION	xi
CHAPTER 1	<i>A Brief Overview of the Aztec Empire</i>	I
CHAPTER 2	<i>Marriage in Aztec Society</i>	9
CHAPTER 3	<i>Perspectives on Polygyny</i>	19
CHAPTER 4	<i>Reassessing the Aztec Kings</i>	25
CHAPTER 5	<i>Polygyny and Progeny</i>	61
CHAPTER 6	<i>Polygyny and Social Mobility</i>	71
CHAPTER 7	<i>Property, Inheritance, and Class</i>	85
CHAPTER 8	<i>Problems with Polygyny</i>	91
CHAPTER 9	<i>Aztec Polygyny and Imperial Expansion</i>	101
CHAPTER 10	<i>Polygyny and the Conquest of Mexico</i>	105
CHAPTER 11	<i>The Marital Heritage of Europe</i>	111
CHAPTER 12	<i>Undermining Aztec Society</i>	123
CHAPTER 13	<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	141
	NOTES	149
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	165
	INDEX	181

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although I did not apply for grants for this project, I nevertheless benefited from several on which I bootstrapped at least the conceptual portion of this project and I feel I should acknowledge them, even though I was primarily working on the funded topics. This book began with a paper I first presented during a fellowship year at the School of American Research (now the School for Advanced Research) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, some years ago, where my primary project (since published) was nearing completion and I was thinking through my next one. That fellowship was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Weatherhead Foundation, and also by a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, to all of which I owe thanks. Thereafter, I spent three months at the University of East Anglia on a Sainsbury Research Fellowship, during which I furthered this research, again while working primarily on the funded project.

Unlike many of my other books, I have not inflicted earlier versions on my colleagues, although doubtless they, friends, and family have all suffered from long discussions of it, voluntary and otherwise. Nevertheless, I do owe specific thanks to my brother, Logan, for reading and helpfully, if sometimes sarcastically, commenting on the readability, logic, and interest of the subject. Thanks to all.

INTRODUCTION

The study of social organization, kinship, and other relationships, such as families, classes, voluntary organizations, and so forth, has lost its central place in American anthropology, in part because of a shift in focus by cultural anthropologists and in part because of the increasingly esoteric focus of earlier studies. Many of these studies left the cultures they were supposedly studying behind and concentrated on logical elaborations of their social systems based on extrapolated rules until they became meaningless, in my estimation. Early in my graduate training, I enrolled in a class on social organization in which the professor went on and on about the elaborate structure of the kinship system of the group among whom she had worked. To me, the complexity and sophistication of the system seemed more suited to the National Security Agency than to a hunter-gatherer society, so I asked, "Do the people know about this?" To which she replied, "Oh no, they have no idea this is going on." At that point, I lost most of my interest in social organization, concluding that if the people themselves did not know about it, and were therefore not acting on any of the elaborate structure she was presenting to the class, then it could not be too important either to them or to me.

Insofar as I could, I avoided the study of kinship for the rest of my graduate training and continued to have scant interest in it thereafter. Nevertheless, having then focused primarily on Mesoamerican cultures, I knew that kin relations were important and, from earlier legal training, I could readily see the connections in our own society between kinship, estates, property, and inheritance. But insofar as anthropology was concerned, the field struck me as relatively sterile, and I must not have been alone, as kinship studies began to languish shortly thereafter. Only occasionally did I read an article that demonstrated something that I actually found interesting about social organization, such as the relationship between residential patterns and group migration. In other words, I find

kinship studies interesting when they can relate kin patterns to other observable behaviors but not so much when they merely assess various types of kinship as logical systems unto themselves.

History has continued with studies of social organization to a greater extent than has anthropology, largely as an outgrowth of demographic history, which emerged in the 1950s. But even there, it is a relatively specialized field of study focusing increasingly on the family, typically Western, rather than broader concerns or more exotic kin patterns.

Over the years, my interest in social organization grew, especially as it relates to political organization, and I have gradually given papers and published articles on that aspect of it, primarily as it relates to the Aztecs of Mexico, my primary field of study. There has been considerable focus on Aztec classes, as well as some more speculative consideration of the nature of Aztec social organization prior to that group's arrival in the Valley of Mexico. My concern here, however, is less with kinship *per se* or with classes than with marriage practices, family organization, and their implications.

In terms of Aztec marriage practices, it is a commonplace to note that the kings and nobles had multiple wives while the commoners had only one. But little more has been done with Aztec marriage. Yet it is primarily on these marriages that I am now focusing and through which I am hoping to bring Aztec culture and history into a new light.

CHAPTER I

A Brief Overview of the Aztec Empire

IMAGES OF BATTLES between brightly garbed Aztec soldiers armed with wooden swords edged with razor-sharp obsidian blades and ornately feathered shields and brightly shining steel-armored Spaniards with Toledo swords and charging horses are not alone in dominating the popular imagination. Scenes of temples atop high pyramids drenched by the blood of still-beating hearts torn from the chests of captives to briefly slake the insatiable appetites of savage gods are also vivid reminders of the Aztec empire. Wood smoke rose in unbroken ascent from the houses, mixed with the sweet aroma of burning resin from the temples. And the city awakened to the blowing of the conch shell and the beat of the temple drums.

Most of what is known about the Aztecs of central Mexico comes from Spanish accounts, as virtually all of the Native books were burned by the Spaniards. And their authors were primarily the conquistadors and the subsequent Spanish immigrants, as well as Christian priests, who wrote about the Conquest from a European perspective, leaving a rather distorted view of Aztec culture and society that emphasized the martial and the religious. The conquistadors hoped to secure royal patronage, and they therefore emphasized the rigors of the Conquest and the enormous obstacles they faced and overcame, while the priests wrote largely to aid in the Natives' conversion from indigenous religions to Christianity. Both accordingly distorted the record in furtherance of their own ends.

The Native books, or codices, were typically screen-fold manuscripts written on *Ficus* bark paper or deerskin and covered with a thin lime coating to provide a white base on which the content was painted. Very few pre-Columbian codices survive from central Mexico, perhaps up to five,



FIGURE 1. An annal page showing a portion of the reign of King Axayacatl and twelve of his conquests during the years 4 Rabbit through 2 House. (Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Codex Mendoza, MS. Arch. Seldon A.1, folio 10r.)

but probably only one, the Codex Borgia, which records monthly ritual festivals. Fortunately, a number of Native accounts were written in the pre-Columbian style during the early colonial period, reflecting earlier ones that had been destroyed. Among these are tribute records, accounts of religious festivals, migration legends, and Native histories in an annal style that eschews narrative or cause and simply lists each year and its most notable events (fig. 1). Typically, these included the various towns conquered, the deaths of kings, and the accessions of their successors. But some also recorded such occurrences as comets, epidemics, earthquakes, and famines.

After the Conquest, some histories and other accounts were written in Nahuatl, the Aztec language, as well as a smattering of other indigenous languages, using the newly introduced Latin alphabet, but most were in

Spanish, with a scattered few in other European languages. And it is largely on these accounts and archival documents that our understanding of the Aztecs is based, aided by relatively few, though important, archaeological discoveries. Most of Tenochtitlan's ruins remain undisturbed beneath the sprawl of modern-day Mexico City, much of it under colonial buildings that are also of historical importance and thus protected.



A single, universally agreed upon overview of Aztec culture and history is not feasible in all its particulars, given the many differing historical sources, archaeological evidence, and competing theoretical perspectives by which it is viewed. But a generalized one is possible, despite disparities between the surviving historical sources. Some offer different dates for the same event, others differ in who the major actors were, and still others offer wholly different interpretations or causes of entire episodes. Sometimes, as in Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún's king list, someone is omitted—in that case, the first king—and other times, someone is emphasized in some sources but ignored in most others, as is the case with the major fifteenth-century political functionary Tlacaelel in the *Crónica X* sources.¹ And occasionally, historical sources displace an event or sequence of events in time, as the *Crónica X* sources do for the mid-fifteenth century.² These differences have been explained as mere scribal lapses, intentional or otherwise, or as reflecting the varying perspectives of the cities where they were composed. And occasionally, they are all presumed to reflect some mythical perspective about which some inconsistency is to be expected, rather than actual historical events. Whatever the reasons, these differences pose daunting problems for the reconstruction of the Aztec past.



Though a major empire, the Aztecs were merely the last of a series of such polities in central Mexico, large and small, and the fact that today we are so aware of the Aztecs is essentially an accident of timing. Had the Spaniards arrived a hundred years earlier, they would have encountered the smaller Tepanec empire in the Valley of Mexico and barely noted the relatively unsophisticated Aztecs, who were, at that time, associated with the city of

Colhuacan. Yet a century later, it was this seemingly insignificant group that they encountered and fought, while the memory of the Tepanec empire was rapidly fading into history.

Nevertheless, the Aztecs dominated Mexico when the Spaniards arrived and were thus the subjects of numerous Conquest-era and colonial chronicles. Indeed, despite their relatively recent rise and untimely fall, the Aztecs came to overshadow all Mesoamerican prehistory as the many accounts depicting their culture were and are used, not always wisely, to explain the other complex historically and archaeologically known groups.³

But when they were conquered, the Aztecs had been in power less than a hundred years, and in such a complex imperial society, kinship had generally been presumed to be secondary to class considerations. This was especially true of the Aztecs, where the various classes were clearly demarcated by the Aztecs themselves, conceptually and behaviorally, by differences in rights and attire, and the routes between the two were well defined, though limited.



What is known of the early history of the Aztecs before they settled their capital of Tenochtitlan is a blend of legend, myth, and perhaps reality. Because it is not reliably historical, there is little point in synthesizing the various surviving traditions to produce a distilled standard version based on majority rule. Nevertheless, one of the most complete accounts of the Aztecs' migration is presented pictorially in the *Codex Boturini* and textually in the *Codex Aubin*.⁴ In those versions, the Aztecs departed from their original island homeland of Aztlan in the year 1 Tecpatl (AD 1146) before entering and then reemerging from Chicomoztoc (Seven-caves place), the legendary origin place of the other major peoples of postclassic central Mexico. There, they also acquired their patron god, Huitzilopochtli, whom they thereafter carried on their migrations until they entered the Valley of Mexico toward the end of the twelfth century, before they eventually settled permanently in Tenochtitlan in 2 Calli (AD 1325).

Until they reached the southern Valley of Mexico, where they interacted with more sophisticated urban peoples, and perhaps even until they established Tenochtitlan, the history of the Aztecs is sparse, focused primarily on recording the years of wandering interspersed by years of settlement in

a manner they could not have known at the time, and is somewhat speculative. Furthermore, after they became an empire Aztec history was apparently altered to conform to their views of themselves and their historical past.

The Aztecs adapted to many Mesoamerican customs and practices during their southward migrations, but when they settled in Tenochtitlan, they were still a minor group of relative barbarians amid the sophisticated urban cultures of central Mexico. Yet by 1372, with growing prosperity and sophistication borrowed from their neighbors, they became a kingdom, embarking on 150 years of royal rule, 56 as a kingdom followed by 93 as an empire. When the Aztecs became an empire in 1428 after the overthrow of their erstwhile masters, the Tepanecs, Aztec society underwent a number of major changes, especially among the nobility. As with state societies generally, class now arguably determined one's place in society more than kinship.⁵

With the Aztec rise, Tenochtitlan emerged as the dominant city of central Mexico, and by the time of the Conquest, its population had vastly outstripped that of any other city, not only in the Valley of Mexico but elsewhere in the New World and in Europe. Its burgeoning population changed the valley socially, politically, and economically, reorienting the primary flow of tribute from the former Tepanec capital of Azcapotzalco to Tenochtitlan. As their population and political control grew, the Aztecs converted more lakeshore to agricultural use and created new fields (*chinampas*) in the lake itself. These measures alone were inadequate to sustain the growing capital, and as tribute flowed into Tenochtitlan, the surrounding cities shifted away from manufacturing goods that could no longer compete with tribute-subsidized wares and turned increasingly toward more intensive agriculture, the products of which were increasingly in demand. Thus, the Aztecs at least partially integrated the Valley of Mexico into a single economic entity: Tenochtitlan became the primarily source of manufactured wares for the surrounding cities, and these cities, in turn, became suppliers of the agricultural goods increasingly needed to feed the burgeoning population of the capital.⁶

Among the most consistently chronicled events in Aztec histories was the succession of kings and their individual contributions to expanding the empire. Often these reigns were recorded using the years of accession through their subsequent deaths, creating a royal duration within which events were attributed, much as they were in medieval and early modern Europe.

The Aztec pattern of rule and succession was not universal in ancient Mexico. Who ruled and who succeeded to the various thrones differed by city, with no single uniform system prevailing, even among the tributaries in the Aztec empire. Part of the explanation for these differences is cultural and part simply the result of different degrees of political complexity, from city-states to city-state confederacies to empires.

During the early years of Aztec history when Tenochtitlan was a tributary to other cities in the Valley of Mexico, its kings were relatively weak and followed in direct succession, although not of a specified son. Thus, succession went from the first king, Acamapichtli, to his son Huitzilihuitl, who was in turn succeeded by his son Chimalpopoca. Chimalpopoca was killed, and he was arguably succeeded for sixty days by his son Xihuitl-Temoc. After Chimalpopoca's death, direct royal father-to-son succession was abandoned. Chimalpopoca was instead succeeded by his great-uncle Itzcoatl, who overthrew the Tepanecs with the aid of other cities, notably Tetzaco and Tlacopan, and set the Aztecs on the course toward empire. Itzcoatl was then succeeded by his nephew Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, who was in turn succeeded by Axayacatl, who was either his son or his grandson. The surviving data conflict on this point, leaving resolution a matter of interpretation. Axayacatl was then succeeded by his brother Tizoc, who was in turn succeeded by yet another brother, Ahuitzotl. Ahuitzotl was succeeded by his nephew Moteuczoma Xocoyotl (the historic Montezuma). During Moteuczoma Xocoyotl's reign, the Spaniards arrived, and on his death in 1520, rulership passed to his brother Cuitlahua. On Cuitlahua's untimely death from smallpox, he was then succeeded by his first cousin Cuauhtemoc. After the defeat of the Aztecs during Cuauhtemoc's reign, the position of Native ruler of Tenochtitlan was reduced from king or emperor to governor under the Spaniards.

Aztec Kings and Years of Reign

1372–1391	Acamapichtli (Reed-fist)
1391–1417	Huitzilihuitl (Hummingbird-feather)
1417–1427	Chimalpopoca (He-smokes-like-a-shield)
1427–1440	Itzcoatl (Obsidian-serpent)

1440–1468	Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina (He-frowned-like-a-lord; He-pierces-the-sky-with-an-arrow)
1468–1481	Axayacatl (Water-mask)
1481–1486	Tizoc (White-chalk-pulque)
1486–1502	Ahuitzotl (Otter; lit. Water-porcupine)
1502–1520	Moteuczoma Xocoyotl (He-frowned-like-a-lord The-younger)
1520	Cuitlahua (Excrement-owner)
1520–1525	Cuauhtemoc (He-descends-like-an-eagle)

Most histories of the Aztecs, and especially political histories, focus on the rulers as reflected in the codices. But the historical codices of other groups, such as the Mixtecs, often reflect queens as well as kings, suggesting at a minimum that women played an important role in those kingdoms. So the question of why women are so underrepresented in Aztec codices arises, as does the issue of whether they did in fact play so little a role as not to be reflected in the Aztecs' historical accounts.

The answer, in part, is that elsewhere in Mesoamerica queens could rule but not among the Aztecs, which largely accounts for their absence from the historical codices. That alone, however, fails to resolve the issue entirely, and I argue that women were in fact the dark matter of Aztec history, and especially of Aztec political history, largely unseen in the surviving records but nevertheless enormously influential in dynastic history. It is this unappreciated importance that I will seek to explore in the rest of this work.

CHAPTER 2

Marriage in Aztec Society

WOMEN HAD MANY roles in Aztec society, some of which will remain unexplored as my focus here is on their significance arising from the largely underanalyzed Aztec marriage practices. These practices were not uniform in Aztec society, however, but differed throughout, primarily by social class.

The broad outlines of Aztec social organization are fairly well-known. The Aztecs had a stratified class system roughly divided into nobles and commoners.¹ Atop Aztec society was the king (*tlatoani*; pl. *tlatoque*), who was the ruler of a province or city.² The king possessed patrimonial lands by virtue of being an upper noble but also received the products of lands attached to his royal office (*tlaoacamilli*).³

Below the king were the upper nobles or lords (*teteuctin*; sing. *teuctli*) who made up the ruling class.⁴ These lords held various political offices and titles, and each headed his own lord's house (*teuccalli*) and held lands to which were attached commoners (*teuccaleque*) who owed him tribute and service.⁵ The position of lord was generally held for life but was not technically hereditary; rather, on a lord's death, the king appointed a successor, generally, though not necessarily, from the previous lord's family line, as the deceased lord's sons were considered his immediate successors.⁶

The lord's lands were possessed by the office rather than its occupant and were thus not independently inheritable by the lord's offspring. But Aztec nobles, or at least the lords, also possessed realty in their own right, and such lands were inheritable. After a lord's death, these were presumably divided among his offspring, or at least his male offspring.

Below this elite stratum were the lower nobles, the *pipiltin* (lit.

“children”; sing. *pilli*), who were descendants of kings and lords.⁷ At least some of these nobles also held hereditary lands (*pillalli*) to which were attached laborers (*mayeque*), though these lands were under and part of the larger lands of the lord’s house.⁸ Such lands were thus not alienable but passed with the office’s lands to the next lord.

The bulk of Aztec society was made up of commoners (*macehualtin*; sing. *macehualli*) who were not supported by patrimonial lands but subsisted through their own labor and were organized in wards or *calpolli* (lit. “big house”).⁹ Presumed to have originated from clans early in Aztec history, the ward was a corporate landholding unit, and its adult male members were assigned land to work for themselves, though these lands could be taken away and reallocated if allowed to lie fallow for too long.¹⁰ Craftsmen, too, were commoners; some lived in separate wards, and others were dispersed throughout the various wards.¹¹ Each ward was led by an elected head (*calpole*; pl. *calpoleque*), though sons of previous ward heads tended to succeed their fathers in these positions.¹² Despite representing the ward to the king, the ward heads were commoners, though of relatively high status.¹³

Owning no personal realty, possessing only the right of usufruct, commoners inherited only personalty. This property consisted of the father’s tools and other items, which went to his son or at least to the son who succeeded to the right to farm his land. Whether other sons inherited is unclear. The mother’s tools, such as cooking and weaving implements, went to her daughters, presumably all of them, as they would all likely marry and labor in their own households.

Below the free commoners was yet another class of *mayeque* (sing. *maye*; also called *tlalmaitin*; sing. *tlalmaitl*) whose members were laborers permanently attached to the patrimonial lands of the nobility.¹⁴ *Mayeque* were rare in Tenochtitlan, if they were present at all, as this class seems to have been created through the conquest that dispossessed its members of their own lands, reducing them to serflike status and so forcing them to work the land that may have been theirs previously but that now belonged to others.¹⁵ Below these serfs were slaves (*tlatlacotin*; sing. *tlacotli*). Anyone could become a slave by selling themselves or as punishment for crimes, but it was a limited status, and slaves retained a right to their own labor, bodies, and offspring and were also free to marry.¹⁶ However, they could be sold, and after four such sales, they could be sacrificed.¹⁷

Such is our general understanding of the Aztec social system and its class structure. And while studies of the nature of Aztec society continue, by far the greatest recent increase in our understanding has been for the early colonial period. This advance has been gained largely through research in Mexico's voluminous archival records from which scholars pieced together scattered clues from a broad range of materials, often written for entirely different purposes. The colonial situation stands in contrast to the pre-Conquest era, for which evidence is largely confined to histories written after the Conquest, often long after. And while new sources are occasionally found or published, advances in our understanding of the pre-Columbian social system have lagged far behind those for the colonial era, a natural result of the disparity in information available for the respective periods. The earliest work took advantage of the fewer but more synthetic sources to reconstruct the pre-Columbian situation, but once this basic work was done, the advantage shifted to the vastly more numerous, though often more fragmentary and dispersed, records of the colonial period.

Thus, our general view of the Aztec social system has some incipient problems. These difficulties, however, stem less from conflicting evidence than from theoretical considerations, and not simply the more speculative macro-theoretical overviews, but well-established, widely accepted approaches in biology and demography and their logical consequences and implications. After all, a certain principle may be held as important in a given social system, such as cross-cousin marriage (one's marriage to the offspring of either parent's opposite-sex sibling—mother's brother's child or father's sister's child). But just because such a choice is considered a cultural ideal, the numerical odds of an available cross cousin of the appropriate sex and age at the time a child should marry under the cultural norms of his or her society are not good, especially in smaller societies where the potential partners are few. In such cases, there must be acceptable alternatives.

Despite some fine, detailed analyses, the broad outlines of Aztec social organization consist largely of generalized, if not idealized, statements.¹⁸ And even though broad generalizations are fostered by the types of data available for the pre-Columbian period, not all of these ring true when examined in relation to general biological and demographic principles and probabilities.



Class membership largely determined marital practices among the Aztecs, as in many archaic societies, although these varied considerably since marriage is far more than the legal unions of men and women, and unites families and lineages as well. And while the biological differences between men and women in producing and caring for children explain the importance of marriage in all societies, the specific form marriage takes in different societies varies.¹⁹ In sixteenth-century Europe, marriage was predominantly between members of the same class, which is presumed to have been true in pre-Hispanic Mexico as well, based on the marriages recorded in early accounts.²⁰

Noble marriages were often arranged by formal petition and were publicly celebrated, whereas marriages among commoners were far less formal and arranged by the prospective groom's family approaching the prospective bride's family.²¹ Commoner marriages were negotiated through the services of old women who served as marriage brokers (*cihuatlantque*).²² But the fact that men's families asked women's families appears to reflect the greater status of men as inheritors of rights to land use.

Although commoner men married commoner women, not all of the latter were equally valued as wives. Worldwide, different cultures weigh the many factors involved in choosing mates differently. Physical beauty was clearly valued in wives, although beauty is culturally defined, and wealth was likely valued as well, but the effects are different for polygamous and monogamous societies.

To avoid misunderstanding in this study, the term *polygamy* requires clarification. *Polygamy* popularly refers to the practice of a single man having more than one wife, and I used the term in the title of this book in the belief that it would be more widely recognized than the proper term but would nevertheless convey the meaning intended. *Polygamy*, however, is actually a general term that refers to any of a number of marriage practices entailing multiple spouses.

There is a rare form of "group" marriage or cenogamy, most famously represented by the Nayar of India, but it is exceedingly rare, statistically insignificant amid the many cultures of the world and irrelevant for our purposes here.²³ Other plural marriages typically fall into two main types:

polyandry and polygyny. Also relatively uncommon among the world's cultures, polyandry is the practice of a one woman having multiple husbands. A broad-based study of marriage found polyandry to be the preferred marriage practice in just 0.6 percent of all cultures.²⁴ Far more common is polygyny, in which one man has multiple wives. Indeed, polygyny is the accepted practice in almost 85 percent of all world cultures, past and present.²⁵ And it is the latter that played a prominent role in Aztec society. Monogamy, the marriage of one man and one woman, dominates Western societies today and seems "normal" to modern sensibilities.²⁶ Worldwide and through time, however, it is a minority practice, being the sole accepted marital form in only 14.5 percent of all cultures.²⁷ Despite this minority status when viewed in terms of cultural practices, monogamy is nevertheless the most prevalent marital form numerically, as most marriages are monogamous, even in polygynous societies.

Preferred marital forms are frequently skewed by other cultural practices, notably infanticide. Male infanticide could theoretically shift the sexual balance at birth by permitting far more female than male infants to survive, thus subsequently creating a larger pool of women to be absorbed into polygynous marriages. Worldwide, however, male infanticide is rare, whereas female infanticide is common, and the latter practice exacerbates the female shortage already created by polygyny. The result is often the institutionalization of the capture and sale of women and the practice of child betrothal.²⁸ Nevertheless, the Aztecs did not engage in significant slaving.

Bride-price, the wealth a man must pay to a woman's family for the right to marry her, is a common feature of polygynous societies in which women are scarce and economically valuable.²⁹ In contrast, dowry, the wealth brought to a marriage by the wife, is associated with monogamy.³⁰ But while there is a pleasing symmetry to the pattern in which scarce and economically valuable women are paid for by men while men are paid by women when the latter are neither scarce nor productive, these patterns are not found consistently because direct economic exchange is not the sole motivator for marriage. Thus, for example, dowry was paid to polygynous rulers in China because the important relationship was political rather than economic.³¹ And in the Aztec case, there are indications that the status of women as potential wives within a class varied and could be raised by certain social practices, for instance, the dedication of a daughter to the temple of Huitzilopochtli for a year.³²

The actual marriage ceremony, or an idealization of it as recorded by the sixteenth-century friar Diego Durán, took place before a Native priest who asked the bride and groom if they wished to be wed.³³ If both answered affirmatively, he tied their mantels together with a knot and they were led to the woman's house (fig. 2). There they circled the burning hearth seven times before sitting on a new mat that served as a bed. Then they were left to consummate their marriage. If the woman showed signs of having been a virgin, a new mat was placed in the house to honor her, but in the absence of such a sign, all the food baskets used in the banquet were perforated to show the guests that she was immoral and had not been a virgin on reaching the bridal bed. Thereafter, she was taken back to her house and a record was made of their respective belongings, which was kept by the parents and the ward heads in the case of divorce, which was reportedly common.³⁴

That all or even most young Aztec women would be virgins at marriage seems improbable, as young men were allowed to have paramours.³⁵ As these marriage accounts were written by Spanish priests decades after the Conquest, they may reflect Spanish religious *deserata* more than indigenous reality. Sahagún describes marriage as follows:

As soon as the parents saw that their son was of age to marry, they spoke to him of their wish to seek a wife for him. And he replied, thanking them for this solicitude, which they showed in marrying him. Then they addressed the leading man who had charge of all the young men, whom they called *telpochtlato*, and they told him that they wished their son to marry, since [the son] held doing so to be good. For this they held a great feast for him and for all the young men whom he had in his care; and for this they held conversation with him, after having given food and drink to him and to all those whom he had in his charge. And at the beginning of the conversation they laid before him an axe for cutting lumber or firewood. This axe was a sign that that young man took his leave, now, of the company of the other young men; for they wished him to marry. And thus the *telpochtlato* departed content. After this the relatives decided, among themselves, upon the woman whom they were to give [to the son], and summoned the marriage-makers, who were some old, honored women, that they might go to speak with the parent of the young woman. [The marriage-makers] went two or three times, and spoke, and returned with the

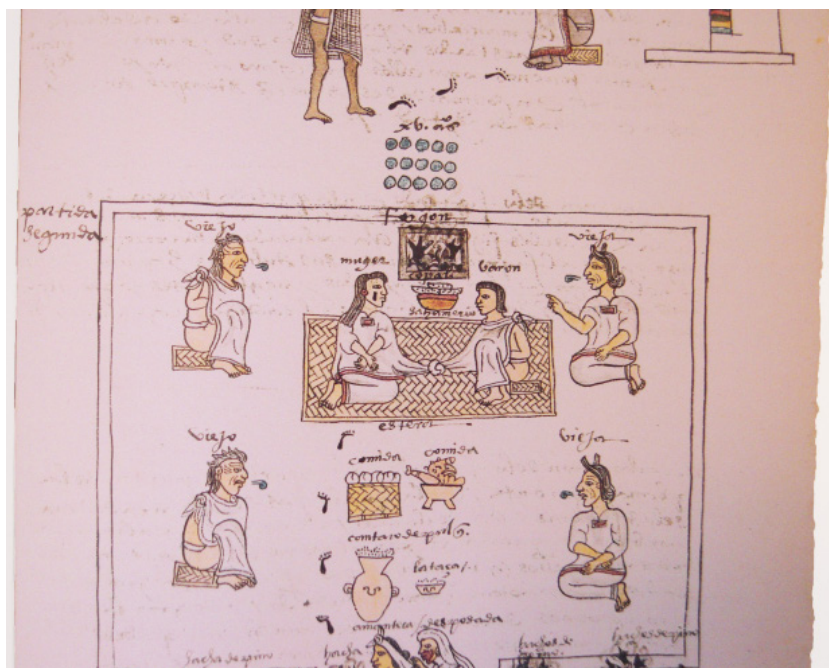


FIGURE 2. A depiction of a marriage ceremony shown by the couple with their mantles tied together. (Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Codex Mendoza, MS. Arch. Seldon A.1, folio 61r.)

reply. During this time, the relatives of the young woman spoke among themselves, and, having decided to give her to him, they gave their consent to the marriage-makers. After this they sought a day of good fortune, of a sign of good disposition [among] which were acatl, oçomatli, cipactli, quauhtli. Having chosen one of these signs, the parents of the young man made known to the parents of the young woman the day on which the marriage should be performed, and then began to prepare the necessary articles for the wedding—[those] to eat and to drink, as well as such [things] as capes, smoke tubes, and flowers. This done, they summoned the leading men and all the other people whom they wanted for the wedding. After the feast and [after] many speeches and ceremonies, those acting for the young man came at about nightfall to take the young woman. They carried her, with

great solemnity, upon the back of a matron, and with many pine torches burning in two rows before her. Many people surrounded her, behind and ahead, until they brought her to the house of the parents of the young man. Having brought her to the house of the young man, they set them both by the hearth, which they always had in the middle of a hall, full of fire. And the woman was at the left hand of the man. Then the mother of the young man placed a very fine shift upon her daughter-in-law, and put for her, by her feet, a richly embroidered skirt. And the mother of the young woman covered her son-in-law with a very fine cape, and tied it over his shoulder, and laid a very richly embroidered breech clout at his feet. This done, a number of old women, who are called *titici*, tied the corner of the young man's cape to the lower part of the young woman's shift. In this way was concluded the marriage, with many other ceremonies, and dinings, and drinking, and dances.³⁶

The age at which Aztec men and women wed had significant demographic consequences since the earlier the marriage, the sooner the first child was born, the shorter the generation, and the greater the population growth, even if family sizes otherwise remained the same. Alonso de Zorita recorded the age of a man at marriage as twenty or a little older, which is likely accurate as that is the age at which men first went to war as soldiers, and at marriage they became heads of households and thus tribute payers.³⁷ Nevertheless, it is difficult to assess the pre-Columbian male marriage age from colonial records because the subsequent practice became distorted by new religious expectations, greatly altered demographic circumstances, and the economic implications of marriage age for the Spaniards. Because marriage marked the entry of young men onto tribute roles rather than their remaining included in the tribute assessment of their fathers, the Spaniards claimed that later marriages, at twenty-five to thirty years of age, were an attempt by the Native men to avoid paying tribute by remaining unmarried and in their fathers' homes.³⁸ At the same time, the Spaniards to whom tribute was owed forced the Indians into early marriages so they would establish independent households and thus be required to pay tribute sooner, and so the tribute recipient would therefore obtain more income.³⁹

The age of women at marriage before the Conquest was apparently

significantly younger than for men, as young as twelve. There are examples of politically motivated elite marriages, however, in which royal daughters as young as seven were given as brides, although it was claimed that at such an age they were treated more as daughters than wives, and certainly their reproductive significance would have been nil.⁴⁰

Newly married couples resided primarily with the husband. And while residential locality may be associated with kinship patterns, the two are not necessarily linked. Nevertheless, in Aztec society, as access to land was held by men, the bride typically moved from her parents' house into that of her new husband.

If the marriage proved unsatisfactory, divorce was an available option in Aztec society. In the event of a divorce—because a written record of their respective property had been made at the time of their marriage—a husband and wife's property was divided according to what each had contributed and the marriage was dissolved. The man was given the male children and the woman the female. Both the man and the woman were then allowed to remarry, although the man was admonished never to return to his wife under pain of death, which was rigorously observed.⁴¹ According to Sahagún, divorce was common, whereas Zorita claimed the contrary.⁴²

CHAPTER 3

Perspectives on Polygyny

IN MODERN WESTERN society, marriage is predominantly monogamous, the union of one man and one woman. So was the adoption of polygyny by the Aztecs normal or even inevitable, and why was it adopted primarily, if not exclusively, among the nobility?

The answers are not to be found directly in the historical records dealing with the Aztecs, so it is necessary to turn to comparative evidence and examine the mathematics of reproduction.¹ Because roughly equal numbers of male and female babies are born to a woman, polygyny is not, and cannot be, practiced by all men in any one society as there are simply too few women to accommodate all the available men. Unless some circumstances skew the survival rate of men—such as endemic warfare that primarily kills men; higher male infant mortality, presumably by male infanticide; or a fatal sexually discriminatory disease—approximately the same number of men as women will be born and survive to maturity. Migration can also skew the normal sex ratio, beneficially for the men remaining at home as more men than women normally leave in a migrating group. While thus enhancing the marital prospects of the men remaining at home, it is simultaneously detrimental to the marriage prospects of the men who depart. But again, under normal reproductive conditions, not every man can have more than one wife.

As a result of the relatively balanced sex ratio at birth, even in societies that permit polygyny, plural marriages are an inherently minority practice, even if they are held as a cultural ideal.² For example, in a mid-twentieth-century study of the nominally polygynous Bedouins in the Negev, over 90 percent were found to be monogamously wed.³ And it is estimated that

in nineteenth-century Egypt, only one in twenty husbands had two wives, the same ratio found in early twentieth-century Syria.⁴ But even these few polygynous marriages in a given society will create a shortage of women for the rest of the men and virtually assure that some men will remain unwed or, at best, more than one man will marry the same woman sequentially, as happens where widow marriage is practiced.

The sexual imbalance created by polygyny can sometimes give rise to such ameliorating strategies as bride capture and child betrothal.⁵ But these are highly localized solutions that displace the sexual imbalance to other societies from which women are seized, in the former case, or they place the burden on other generations from which increasingly younger brides are taken, in the latter.⁶ Indeed, in 42 percent of societies allowing polygynous unions, fewer than 20 percent of all marriages are plural.⁷ Among nineteenth-century Mormons, only 15 to 20 percent were polygynous; one study puts the rate of polygynous marriages at only 5 percent among Arabs, though above 25 percent in sub-Saharan Africa; and in another study of thirteen sub-Saharan nations, polygyny characterized from 17 to 30 percent of all marriages.⁸ And because only some men can marry polygynously, the practice is dominated by the wealthy and powerful elite.⁹ Such tends to be the case in archaic empires, including ancient Babylonia and Israel, and among the Aztecs, where nobles took more than one wife, including slaves, though they allegedly sought those with such advantages as the ability to embroider, cook, or speak well.¹⁰

Because of the artificial sexual imbalance in society created by polygyny and the normal male/female sex ratio at birth of roughly 1:1, the inevitable result of allowing some men to have multiple wives is to leave others without any women to wed. Given this seemingly major shortcoming to the practice of polygyny, why did it emerge and why did it become socially acceptable worldwide?

The question has spurred considerable debate, and one explanation offered for the prevalence of polygyny is that it did not originally create a sexual imbalance but in fact arose in societies possessing too many women in relation to men, as might occur after a war in which many men were slain or captured by the enemy.¹¹ Although this explanation is demographically plausible in an occasional instance, polygyny is so widespread that it is unlikely that so many societies would have suffered the necessary gender-specific population imbalances to give rise to the practice, much less for it

to persist. Such a natural sexual imbalance explanation, however, is neither the only nor the most common one. More scholars argue that polygyny emerged for reasons of sex, reproduction, prestige, economic benefits, and politics.

Explaining polygyny as a means of guaranteeing adequate sexual outlets is not sufficient when alternative social arrangements such as prostitution and concubinage exist, and polygyny need not have been adopted as the marital norm. Some have suggested that the argument has validity in societies that have strong postpartum sexual prohibitions. In these societies, sexual intercourse is prohibited for a culturally prescribed period after a wife has given birth, often years. In these societies, additional wives would allow continued sexual intercourse for the husband throughout the period during which the new mother was ritually required to abstain.¹² Nevertheless, this explanation applies only to a minority of societies and is unlikely to account for the general emergence of polygyny. Moreover, most men have only a single wife even in societies in which new mothers are ritually prohibited from engaging in sex.

The idea that polygyny is adopted to increase reproduction has considerable merit, however. Polygyny clearly increases a man's likelihood of siring more offspring and thereby increasing his family's wealth and power.¹³ This explanation finds support in a number of societies that allow men to add wives if their first wives prove to be barren.¹⁴ In such cases, polygyny permits a man to take an additional wife with whom he may produce a male child and thus better ensure the continuation of his line. In a study of thirty-nine cases of Bedouin polygyny, for example, seven first wives were found to be sterile, twelve had given birth only to girls, and the overall rates of childlessness among polygynously married women were higher than among those who were monogamous.¹⁵ But as reproduction is not an end in itself, this proffered explanation for polygyny must include something other than merely increasing the size of the family.

Polygyny does confer great status in many societies but is not a status marker in and of itself.¹⁶ That is, polygyny is prestigious because it reflects the economic power that having multiple wives gives the husband.¹⁷ In fact, in many societies the wealthiest families are polygynous not simply because the man has more wealth to begin with and is thus eligible to take and support additional wives but because having more women and children to contribute to labor leads to greater wealth, especially in agrarian societies.

Furthermore, these polygynous unions do not simply exploit women: in some societies polygynously married women prefer this arrangement over monogamous marriage because it provides them more help with their labor.¹⁸ Thus, polygyny has been explained as arising from the direct economic benefits of a man having more wives who produce more children and who work and augment his wealth, primarily in agricultural or pastoral societies, though not in hunter-gatherer or industrial ones.¹⁹ This explanation has also been stressed in the Aztec case, since women produced valuable textiles.²⁰

But as compelling as the economic explanation for polygyny appears, it nevertheless does not account for everything about polygyny, as Laura Betzig cogently argues, including why wives are sometimes cloistered or why women who are still able to work are nevertheless divorced when they are no longer fertile.²¹ Nor does it explain why men object to their wives having children by other men, since another laborer is another laborer.²² While Betzig leans heavily toward a Darwinian reproductive argument, she also sees political advantages in polygyny, which is yet another social explanation for the practice.²³ One of its political purposes is the establishment of wider kin networks and the cementing of political alliances with affinal and, potentially, genetic ties.²⁴ And certainly polygyny is correlated with the growth of social wealth and stratification.²⁵

But a more recent series of explanations has emerged that is likewise social at heart yet has the aura of biology (or sociobiology). These explanations tend to reject economics, politics, and prestige as primary causes and concentrate instead on the practice's reproductive advantages, with the most successful men acquiring the most wives, producing the most offspring, and thereby passing on their genes in larger numbers than less successful members of their society.²⁶ And the Aztecs have also been taken as an example of the type of despotic society that allows polygyny to flourish.²⁷ One frequently cited example of this elite polygyny in ancient Mexico is that of King Nezahualpilli of Tetzcoco, who ruled from 1472 to 1515 and reportedly had over two thousand wives and concubines.²⁸

It is therefore not unusual that Aztec marital patterns differed significantly from those in the West. Instead, it is to be expected. And among the Aztecs, commoners were usually monogamous whereas nobles were generally polygynous, though the number of wives one could have does not

appear to have been legally mandated. Wealthy commoners were at least theoretically permitted to have more than one wife as well.²⁹

Nevertheless, the sociobiological explanation pushes the cause of polygyny back toward sexual reproduction and uses the Aztecs as one of the main cases in point. As I will subsequently argue, however, whatever the benefits of that position, it is inadequate to explain the Aztec case. Instead, the underlying rationale for polygyny among the Aztecs was not only political for the individual, but was also a major factor in both the rise and fall of their empire.

Reassessing the Aztec Kings

EVEN IF A political purpose lay behind Aztec polygyny, what actual role did it play in their society and throughout their empire, and how was it effected? To address these issues, some reconsideration of Aztec royal succession is necessary, with a greater focus on kinship.

The ancestry of the first Aztec king, Acamapichtli, is disputed, but from the very first Aztec ruler, the largely ignored role of the wife was not merely significant but crucial. In one tradition, Acamapichtli's parents were an Aztec man named Opochtli Itztahuatzin, who at that time would necessarily have been a commoner, and a woman named Ilancueitl, who was the daughter of Xihuitl-Temoc, king of Colhuacan.¹ But in another version, Acamapichtli's mother was named Atotoztli and was the daughter of the king of Colhuacan, whose name was Acocoxtli.² The latter account appears to be accurate to this extent, as Ilancueitl is otherwise recorded as Acamapichtli's wife rather than his mother, suggesting confusion in that portion of the record. But the parts of the two accounts that do not conflict agree that Acamapichtli's father was an Aztec named Opochtli and his mother was from a noble family from Colhuacan.³ This maternal lineage gave Acamapichtli a claim to noble status.

Intermarrying with a noble family—typically the ruling family—of another city was a traditional means of creating a legitimate ruling lineage in a new town and occurred often in ancient Mexico. And Acamapichtli was ideally suited to the task, being descended from an Aztec father and a noble mother of a ruling lineage.

Acamapichtli's precise date of birth is unknown, but he was still a youth when he was made king of Tenochtitlan and began his rule at the age of

twenty, which would accord with his as-yet-unmarried status.⁴ His age on ascending the throne would suggest that he was born around 1352, some years after the founding of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan (generally considered to have occurred in 1325). During the first forty-seven years following Tenochtitlan's founding the city had no king, suggesting that the leaders of the various wards governed, although at this time the city was first subservient to Colhuacan and subsequently to Azcapotzalco.

When Acamapichtli took the throne, the Aztec king was little more than a figurehead. He held neither personal nor office lands and was dependent upon tribute from the commoners. Funneled through their hands, this tribute made the ward heads the newly appointed king's effective masters. And it may have been this political situation that led to his most notable action.

Acamapichtli's wife, Ilancueitl, was reportedly barren, so each of the ward heads of Tenochtitlan gave the king one of their daughters (Acazitli, Tezacatet, Ahuexotl, Ocelopan, Tenoch, and Aatel) as his wives. It was therefore these women who produced most of Acamapichtli's offspring.⁵

It is highly unlikely that all of the presumably monogamous calpolli heads would have had daughters of marriage age available when needed by the king. Nevertheless, whether or not the account of Ilancueitl's barrenness and Acamapichtli's marriage to the daughters of the calpolli heads was true, it created a political rationalization for an Aztec noble class and established the historical precedent for the expansion of polygyny among this new Aztec elite. From Acamapichtli's perspective, these marriages cemented his ties to the real powers in Tenochtitlan and made his offspring by their daughters both *de facto* and *de jure* nobles. And from the ward heads' perspectives, this alliance minimized the importance of Ilancueitl's kin ties to Colhuacan and may have helped prevent domination by members of her matriline, to which Ilancueitl's marriage opened the door.

Acamapichtli reportedly had seven sons (Cuatlecoatl, Tlacahuepan, Tlatolzac, Huitzilihuitl, Epcoatl, Ihuitl-Temoc, and Tlacacochtoc) by the ward heads' daughters.⁶ By some accounts, Ilancueitl was so distraught over her barrenness that Acamapichtli allowed her to pretend that she had given birth to these children; she breastfed them, and the Aztec people believed that they were hers.⁷ If Ilancueitl was barren, it is unlikely that she could actually have breastfed the children, and one wonders how successful this presumed deception was, although it may well have been a broadly

accepted social convention within Aztec society to place these offspring in the royal line of descent.

Their descent from Acamapichtli was not in issue, only their parentage by Ilancueitl, as it was she who carried the royal blood needed to establish a legitimate line of Aztec rulers in Tenochtitlan. In addition to these sons by his Aztec wives, whether or not they were accepted as the offspring of his Colhua wife, Acamapichtli also had another son with a woman variously described as either a slave or a commoner from Azcapotzalco, and that son, Itzcoatl, though illegitimate, was to play a major role in Aztec history.⁸

Acamapichtli apparently married Ilancueitl two years after he became king, which was around 1374, and he ruled for nineteen years, although some accounts implausibly claim that he ruled for forty years, which conflicts with other more securely known dates.⁹ When he died in 1391, he was survived by twenty-three children.



On his death, Acamapichtli was succeeded by his son Huitzilihuitl, who was not his eldest son but the fourth.¹⁰ Huitzilihuitl was a legitimate heir by descent from his father and claimed royal Colhua ancestry through Ilancueitl, though if the account of her barrenness is believed, his genetrix may have been one of Acamapichtli's Aztec wives.¹¹ In fact, it is likely that Huitzilihuitl's mother was either Cuauhtloquezqui or Acacitli.¹²

When Huitzilihuitl ascended the throne he, like his father, was still unmarried, but he soon wed Ayauhcihuatl, daughter of King Tezozomoc of Azcapotzalco, the founder of the Tepanec empire, which was the ascendant power in the Valley of Mexico. By her, Huitzilihuitl fathered Chimalpopoca, who would ultimately succeed him.¹³ Ayauhcihuatl died when Chimalpopoca was only nine, predeceasing her husband by one year, which would put Chimalpopoca's birth in 1407 and his mother's death in 1416.¹⁴

Some accounts claim that Huitzilihuitl then married the daughter of the king of Cuauhnahuac, by whom he had many more children, but the records are not unanimous, and other sources record his marriage to a princess of Tiliuhcan Tlacopan.¹⁵ Any children he may have sired by a wife from Cuauhnahuac would have linked them to people from south of the Valley of Mexico and thus not significant players in local politics. Children by the

wife from Tiliuhcan Tlacopan would have linked them to the Tepanecs. But the one child of his Colhua wife (and given her death the following year, she likely produced no more children) also established a powerful link to the Tepanecs, the emerging valley power. Whatever the maternal line of his offspring, Huitzilihuitl was survived by at least five children (Teotlatlahuiqui; Huehue Cuitlahuatzin, who governed Ixtlapalapan; Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina; a woman, Yaocihuatl, who married Toyaotlancatzin, lord of Coatlichan; and another woman whose name is unrecorded), one of whom, Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, would eventually become the fifth Aztec king.¹⁶ There are claims of other children (Tlacaoel, Huehue Zaca, Citlalcoatl, Aztacoatl, Axicyotzin, Cuauhtzitzimitzin, Xiconoc, and Tlaccacocho) who may not have been the progeny of his legitimate wives, and at least one, Tlacaoel, became an important political official and adviser under several successive kings.¹⁷

By one account, Huitzilihuitl ruled for only thirteen years and died young, which is almost certainly wrong. He was indeed young when he came to the throne—no more than twenty and possibly younger—but he appears to have ruled for some twenty-six years, which would make him far older than the thirty claimed at the time of his death.¹⁸



When he died, Huitzilihuitl was succeeded by Chimalpopoca, his son by Ayauhcihuatl, thus securely linking the legitimate royal lines of Tenochtitlan to that of Azcapotzalco.¹⁹ Chimalpopoca reportedly began his rule when he was only ten or twelve, following the death of this father, but based on the dates given for the events of Huitzilihuitl's life, Chimalpopoca would most likely have been ten when he reached the throne.²⁰ The ascent of so young a king was a direct result of the prevailing succession system in which only a legitimate son of the preceding king could be crowned.

On reaching adulthood, Chimalpopoca married a daughter of Cuacuauhuitzahuac, the king of Tenochtitlan's sister city, Tlatelolco, on the adjacent island to the north, which eventually effectively merged with Tenochtitlan, both physically and politically.²¹ That king, in turn, is variously recorded as being the son of King Tezozomoc or of Epcoatl (or Mixcoatl), the prior king of Tlatelolco who was also Tezozomoc's brother. Whatever the truth of his parentage, the union secured yet another royal

link between the Aztecs and the Tepanec ruler. Chimalpopoca reportedly produced six children (Miquitzin; Maxihuatzin, who ruled in another city; Yohualpopocatzin; Cuauhtzitzimitzin or Quetzalcuahtzin; Ixcoman; and a woman whose name is unrecorded), though at least two more (Xihuitl-Temoc and Teuctleuac) are also listed.²² Xihuitl-Temoc reputedly ruled briefly, but Teuctleuac was killed with Chimalpopoca when the latter was assassinated in 1427, ending his ten years on the throne.²³

The circumstances of Chimalpopoca's death are murky. The generally accepted story claims that he and his son Teuctleuac were assassinated on the orders of Maxtlatl, who had succeeded to the throne of Azcapotzalco on the death of his father, Tezozomoc.²⁴ Although the timing is auspicious, there is strong reason to doubt this version of events.

The Tepanec empire was locked in turmoil of its own. After ruling for a reported sixty years, King Tezozomoc died in 1427, leaving five children including Maxtlatl, king of Coyohuacan, and Ayauhcihuatl, wife of Huitzil-ihuitl and mother of Chimalpopoca.²⁵ Tezozomoc had allegedly appointed another son, Tayauh, as the rightful heir to the throne of Azcapotzalco. But after Tezozomoc's death, Maxtlatl assassinated his brother and assumed the Tepanec throne. Since the Tepanec kings were also sons of Tezozomoc, and were thus Maxtlatl's brothers, and similarly ruled Tepanec cities, they had equal claims to the imperial throne. However, there was dissension. Unable to unite his brothers behind him, Maxtlatl was left in control not of a unified empire but of the capital city of Azcapotzalco and perhaps Coyohuacan, over which he had ruled for seventeen years.²⁶

Maxtlatl's position was less than secure, and it seems extremely unlikely that he should choose to strike first at his nephew Chimalpopoca, a young and inexperienced ruler and the least dangerous of all the potential opponents he faced.²⁷ Nevertheless, Chimalpopoca was killed, though by whom is uncertain.

If Maxtlatl was actually behind the assassination, he could have been concerned about Chimalpopoca's potential claim to the Tepanec throne. Such a threat was extremely unlikely, however, as any descent-based claim Chimalpopoca might have had to the Tepanec throne would have been far weaker than those of any of Maxtlatl's brothers. Furthermore, Chimalpopoca had little political or military experience since he had been too young to exercise power when he was crowned at the age of ten. Instead, his uncle Itzcoatl had ruled on his behalf as regent.²⁸

In a system that dictates succession by descent, it is virtually inevitable that sooner or later a successor will be in line to succeed yet not be competent to rule, either by temperament, mental capacity, or age. Such is often the case in succession by primogeniture.²⁹ Although Aztec royal succession was by direct royal descent, it was not dependent on birth order, so any of a number of male offspring might be selected to succeed. Perhaps Huitzil-huitl had no older sons capable of ruling or perhaps an alliance with the city of that son's mother was crucial, but whatever the reason, Chimalpopoca was chosen as his successor at the age of ten, and in light of his youth, the appointment of a regent to govern on his behalf until he came of age was inevitable.

Although a regent is a reasonable solution to the problem of official kings who are not competent to rule, the position itself is problematic because it places power in the hands of a person who must have the skill and connections to exercise it yet be someone who will not enjoy the full trappings of the office whose power he exercises, which his descendants cannot inherit. The likelihood that young kings would be assassinated or otherwise removed by their regents was minimized by the appointment of regents who themselves lacked the requisites to rule, such as close kin ties or a strong political base, so that an assassination would not result in the regent's elevation to the throne. In some archaic empires, eunuchs were chosen as regents for that reason. However, placing a weak person in the regency also undermines the ruling dynasty and strengthens those who select the king. Regents have ever been tempted to eliminate the king and take power for themselves, as occasionally happened in Europe.³⁰

Itzcoatl appeared to be ideally suited to become regent. He was a mature man of thirty and possessed the requisite experience, already being a successful military leader with the title of general (*tlacateccatl*).³¹ But perhaps just as important, he was also ineligible to succeed to the throne under the prevailing system of royal succession, since he was not descended from Huitzilohuitl; since he was not noble through both parents as his mother was either a slave or a commoner; and since his birth was illegitimate, even though his father, Acamapichtli, had been a king.

Little is known about regents in Aztec society, although they were presumably appointed by society's decision-makers, the upper nobles. But the selection of Itzcoatl as regent is the only recorded instance of regency in Aztec history.

Zorita claimed that regents in Mexico ruled for life. And whether true elsewhere in Mesoamerica, this is not known to be the case for Tenochtitlan, both because regents would not have been appointed under the new succession system that emerged when the Aztecs became an empire and because Chimalpopoca was the only certain example and his life was cut short.³² But if Zorita was correct, what would the implications be for Itzcoatl?

A lifelong regency would mean that Itzcoatl had significantly less incentive to assassinate Chimalpopoca since he already exercised all the power of the king and his grip was secure for life, whereas an attempted coup might lead to his own ouster or death. But differences remain between a lifelong regency and kingship, and most of these lie in succession.

Regardless of the power wielded by the regent, the existence of a hereditary king, however young, created a competing focus of loyalty for followers and potentially diluted the power exercised by the regent. Moreover, whatever his power, a lifelong regent would nevertheless not be king, and his heirs would not succeed to the throne. In Itzcoatl's case, his sons did not inherit, though his grandson may have, and a regent's vanity in wishing to be king cannot be ruled out. But perhaps the most compelling reason for Itzcoatl to seize power was to eliminate Chimalpopoca's line and its strong ties to the Tepanecs through both his mother and his wife. While Itzcoatl's mother was also Tepanec, she was non-noble and thus did not figure into dynastic politics; nor did his own non-Tepanec wife. And in Itzcoatl's mind, Chimalpopoca's strong ties to the Tepanecs might have led him either to support Maxtlatl in his quest to consolidate the empire behind him or to support the brothers who opposed him. Neither course of action would materially advance Aztec interests.



One report claims that after Chimalpopoca's death, one of his sons, Xihuitl-Temoc, ruled Tenochtitlan for sixty days, although most accounts do not mention this event.³³ Since Chimalpopoca was only twenty or twenty-one years of age when he was killed and the normal age of men at marriage was twenty, all of his sons were most likely very young. Nevertheless, an infant could have become king under the traditional succession system, just as Chimalpopoca had. Such an infant king would be assisted by a regent who

ruled in his place, so the possibility that Xihuitl-Temoc did technically succeed his father is included here as a reflection of the prevailing royal succession system that was not implemented as the system was about to be discarded. But it is unlikely that Xihuitl-Temoc was ever king: there is no record of his coronation, and in any case, his “reign” was without significance even if he was at least nominally king, however briefly. I consider his ascension to the throne to be highly unlikely unless it was technically considered to be an automatic event on the death of his father and predecessor. He was utterly irrelevant to Aztec royal history and therefore will be omitted from subsequent discussions. Instead, the fourth king of Tenochtitlan was Itzcoatl, Chimalpopoca’s regent, who led the Aztecs in their rise to empire.



Itzcoatl’s succession to the throne marked a major departure from the previous practice of direct lineal succession, father to son. Moreover, the mothers of the previous successors were, in every case, noblewomen from the ruling lineage of cities to which the Aztecs were allied, usually as subordinates. The system of royal succession to that point, however, had not primarily emphasized purity of bloodline, at least not Aztec bloodlines, despite the importance of descent. By blood, Acamapichtli was half-Colhua and half-Aztec; his son Huitzilihuitl was three-fourths Colhua and one-quarter Aztec; and Huitzilihuitl’s son Chimalpopoca was three-eighths Colhua, half-Tepanec, and only one-eighth Aztec, so Aztec blood actually decreased through these first three generations of Aztec kings and that of the Colhua with the third. Itzcoatl, as the son of Acamapichtli and a Tepanec woman, was only a quarter Aztec biologically, and he was more Aztec than Chimalpopoca, but not much. Blood quantum was not important, but kin ties to powerful families, both paternal and maternal, were. Itzcoatl’s succession, however, violated both the rule of direct descent and the principle of powerful maternal as well as paternal lineages.

Itzcoatl’s father, Acamapichtli, had been a king (which would have made Itzcoatl about forty years of age when he became king), and his mother was either a slave or a commoner, so he was illegitimate under Aztec kinship principles, whatever his paternity.³⁴ But since there was no legitimate successor at the time of Chimalpopoca’s death (or at least not an adult one, if

the case of Xihuitl-Temoc is seriously considered) and since he was already serving as regent to Chimalpopoca and was the effective ruler, Itzcoatl may well have simply seized formal power, which is a persistent temptation for all regents.³⁵

When Itzcoatl took power, the Tepanec empire, to which the Aztecs were tributaries, was in the midst of a succession struggle of its own. Although Chimalpopoca was the grandson of Tezozomoc, he was a minor ruler and posed no serious threat to Maxtlatl's claim to the throne, usurped though it was; Chimalpopoca posed no threat to Maxtlatl's rule, his claim, or his physical safety. For Maxtlatl, it was his brothers who were the problem. So despite reports of Maxtlatl having assassinated Chimalpopoca, we have little reason to believe that he would have sought the death of the least threatening ruler in the Valley of Mexico while leaving unmolested those who were significant competitors.

Itzcoatl, however, was a different matter. He was a mature man of about forty at this time, had served as regent for a decade and thus understood power and rule, and was an experienced and successful military man, serving as a general in the army. In short, he was precisely the sort of man Maxtlatl would not wish to see on the throne of Tenochtitlan at this time. So in addition to the reasons Maxtlatl had for keeping a weak ruler such as Chimalpopoca on the throne, he would have had even more reasons to keep a strong ruler such as Itzcoatl off. So who benefited from Chimalpopoca's assassination? Just as certainly as Maxtlatl did not benefit from it, Itzcoatl did. Moreover, this Tepanec succession crisis offered perhaps the one occasion on which Itzcoatl's greatest liability as a candidate for the throne—his slave or commoner mother—would be minimized, which was perhaps the very reason he had been chosen to be regent in the first place: his presumed inability to threaten Chimalpopoca's ascension to the throne. Chimalpopoca's place was ensured by his grandfather Tezozomoc. But when the latter died, Maxtlatl destroyed the remaining unity of the emperor's descendants, and Chimalpopoca's maternal line not only became less important, but may have become an actual liability. And once Chimalpopoca's matriline was minimized, Itzcoatl's own was much less of a disadvantage, so suspicion for the assassination must fall on him.

Maxtlatl's seizure of his father's throne shattered the unity of the Tepanec cities, and after Chimalpopoca's death, Itzcoatl seized power. Had the Tepanecs remained united, an Aztec overthrow would have been highly

improbable, if not impossible, but the Tepanec empire was in disarray, and Itzcoatl led its overthrow, initiating the rise of the Aztec empire and the transformation of its society.

In the Tepanec war, Itzcoatl gathered internal support by promoting not only his own relatives but also the sons of other allied kings, which was probably politically essential given his weak claim to the throne. Among the primary beneficiaries of Itzcoatl's victory were his brothers (Cuauhtlecoatl, Tlachuepan, Tlatolzac, Epcoatl, and Tzompantli) and nephews (Tlacaoel, Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, Huehue Zaca, Citlalcoatl, Aztacoatl, Axicoyotzin, Cuauhtzitzimitzin, and Xiconoc).³⁶ But more than his immediate kin, Itzcoatl also sought to position members of his lineage in powerful offices. Among the descendants he placed in power were Huehue Cuitlahuatzin, who ruled Ixtlapalapan; Ixtacmixcoatzin, who ruled Xilotepec; Chalchiuhtlatonac, who ruled Apan; a woman whose name is unrecorded but who went to Atotonilco and married a simple vassal who, because of the marriage, became the king of that city; the child of their union, Itzcoatzin, who ruled Atotonilco; and Huehue Tezozomoczin, who also ruled in Ixtlapalapan.³⁷ But those who did best were collateral kin, many of whom were the legitimate offspring of Acamapichtli and Huitzilihuitl, rather than Itzcoatl's own direct descendants. Notable among these were his nephews Tlacaoel and Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, both of whom became generals (*tlacochcalcatl* and *tlacatecatl*, respectively), while one of Itzcoatl's sisters married Netzahualcoyotl, king of Tetzcoco, and secured that alliance.³⁸ During his reign, Itzcoatl consolidated the nascent Aztec empire, which was then largely confined to the western and southwestern portions of the Valley of Mexico, as well as previous Tepanec tributaries extending into modern-day Guerrero. All of these subordinate towns provided tribute and lands that now flowed to the Aztec king and his noble supporters. For the first time, Aztec kings possessed economic wealth that was independent of calpolli tribute and reduced the political restraint exercised by the ward heads. Political decisions could now be implemented without undue concern for commoner wishes.

Although Itzcoatl carried out conquests in and near the Valley of Mexico, he did not test the bounds of his new power by conducting distant military campaigns; nevertheless, he laid the foundation for his successors to do so. Itzcoatl had ruled for a relatively brief thirteen years when he fell ill and died in 1440.³⁹ The brevity of Itzcoatl's rule, and his limited marital

prospects prior to becoming king, meant that on his death, he likely left no adult sons by high noblewomen who were in a position to succeed to the throne. During the rule of the three pre-imperial kings, moreover, royal wealth had been limited, and relatively little flowed to the top to sustain large-scale polygyny by others, even upper nobles. So when Itzcoatl became regent, and perhaps even when he became king, he would have had relatively few wives and, consequently, few offspring. Even if Itzcoatl began acquiring more wives as regent, none of his sons by these women would have been adults by the time he died. And as something of an illegitimate pretender, Itzcoatl would have needed the support of the other nobles to stay in power. After the Tepanec overthrow and the acquisition of external tribute, the lords' houses were probably funded for the first time or at least were adequately and increasingly funded.

Although a few of his sons were placed on the thrones of other cities, the likeliest candidates for the more important positions would have been the nobles who supported Itzcoatl, not his own young sons who had few other connections.⁴⁰ As a result, when Itzcoatl died he left no sons in position to perpetuate the lineage, or at least none with sufficient noble ties and support.



Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, third son of King Huitzilihuitl, was chosen to succeed Itzcoatl and was the first king selected under the new succession system that emerged after the founding of the empire.⁴¹ Although he was the son of a previous king, he did not succeed solely on that basis but was reportedly chosen by a high council of four men.⁴² Under this elective succession system, the identity of the individual who would become the next king was uncertain until he was actually selected because numerous candidates were available, even among the offspring of previous kings. Thus, Aztec codices consistently record the dates of accessions and deaths of kings but never their birth dates, as the importance of an eventual king's birth was unrecognized at the time it occurred amid the births of the many other potential royal candidates. As a consequence, none of the birth dates employed here are from these codices but are from colonial accounts or extrapolations, and all were compiled decades, even centuries, after the fact and thus often give obviously erroneous or conflicting information. In any

case, it was Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, perhaps the greatest of the Aztec rulers, who laid the social foundations of the new empire.

Although polygyny was common among the rulers of ancient Mexico, the inheritance system in Tenochtitlan under the first three kings limited potential successors to their sons and only their legitimate sons. Although all these sons might marry multiple wives, age permitting, once a new king was chosen, the marital prospects of the unsuccessful royal brothers lessened while that of the new king increased. Nevertheless, when Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina first came to the throne, polygyny was most likely still rather limited, as there was yet little wealth concentrated even in the hands of the king with which to support multiple wives.

The pre-imperial direct succession system necessarily limited the king's potential successors to his legitimate sons, but with the shift to the imperial system of election, the pool, although similarly limited to royal sons, now included the sons and even grandsons of any previous king, which resulted in a far larger pool of candidates and, potentially, less directly related noble pretenders. Furthermore, the maternal link now became crucial because all subsequent legitimate successors traced their lineage from the king by direct descent. Within that group, what distinguished the individual candidates and made one more successful than the others was not merely being the son of a king but rather his female links.



The political importance of the maternal link has been virtually ignored as a factor in Aztec succession. Yet because all the successors (and, presumably, their competitors) were the sons or grandsons of kings, paternity established primary eligibility but thereafter played little role in who would succeed. A king's sons were precisely equal patrilineally (and his brothers were approximately so) because they shared the same father. What distinguished them was the political importance of their mothers.

The crucial role of the matriline does not mean that women were the kingmakers of Aztec society. Some particularly gifted women may have played significant roles, but these had no apparent institutional basis. Certainly, in early medieval Europe women jockeyed for position, often viciously, to further the interests of their sons, but any such manipulations in Aztec society did not survive in the indigenous accounts.⁴³ What made

a wife important was her pivotal role in linking the royal lineage with powerful members of her own patrilineage.

The political importance of the mother was crucial not only among subordinate rulers but in Aztec succession as well.⁴⁴ While the successor of a tributary king was typically his son by his politically most important wife, which would ordinarily be his Aztec wife, the most important wife of the Aztec king lacked such a clear-cut criterion, as many of the wives were also Aztecs, and it was invariably from among these that a successor was chosen.

So what made one wife more important than another? Her significance lay not in her own offices or positions, as she typically had none, but in the link she created between the king and the important men in her own natal and extended family. And in the struggle for succession following the king's death, if not preceding it, success depended on broad political support among the upper nobility. This support was most easily assured by one who descended not only from the king, whose family influence the sons all shared, but by one who descended from a powerful maternally linked family. Thus, the matriline was the hidden determinant of succession among the Aztecs.

The fate of a wife was set by her marriage to the king, and her family's prospects were accordingly enhanced. But in the Aztec system of succession, no heir existed until the king died. All were heirs expectant only. Yet the political fate of matrilineally connected families hung on the outcome of that succession process. None could count on their kinsman being chosen until after the fact, and all had to support the reigning monarch to avoid losing what chance they had of elevating one of their own to the throne. The fate of each of the king's many wives' natal families and the kin to whom they were linked depended on getting their kinswoman's son into office.

The matrikin of some of the king's wives were doubtless too unimportant for their influence to be significant in the succession process, so their wife-candidate had little expectation of ever becoming queen-mother. These limited-prospect wives included those of lesser status than upper noblewomen and all foreign wives. The pool of true potential queen-mothers was drawn only from the most powerful lineages, those of the upper nobility with enough political power to influence the succession process.

The importance of most royal daughters depended on their being old

enough to take an active part in the political process, either as potential officeholders or as wives, when their father died. As a result, the marital ties that connected the empire lagged twenty years or so behind its political expansion, which likely created different zones of Aztec alliances. The cities conquered over the previous twenty years (or however long a king's reign lasted) would have primary allegiance to the conquering king and his matrikin, even after the next king came to power, so it was important to retain the throne in as close a group of upper nobles as possible so that even in the event of a lineage shift, tributary alliances would still be tied by kinship to someone close to the throne, even if not on it. This need encouraged the ruling elite to marry their close kin (as, for example, Cuitlahua, who wed his niece), as was common among ruling elites elsewhere.⁴⁵



During his twenty-eight years of rule, Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina carried out numerous military campaigns that expanded the Aztec empire, greatly increasing the power of the state and the wealth of the crown and nobles, as well as that of the commoners. His succession brought the Acamapichtli/Huitzilihuitl lineage back into power, and given the length of his reign (the longest of any Aztec ruler), his greater age at accession (about forty), and his royal descent, he probably already had multiple wives. But his concern was not simply a return to power of the traditional elites, although the status and wealth now enjoyed by the crown was unprecedented. During his reign, Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina introduced a number of new laws, some of which were aimed at strengthening the perquisites of the nobility, while others sought to open Aztec society to the advancement of other Aztecs, both commoners and nobles, based on merit.

Among Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina's new edicts were sumptuary laws giving exclusive rights to the twelve lords to wear special mantles with specified designs, and to the lesser nobles, he granted the right to wear other mantles according to their valor and accomplishments. These and other limited rights, such as the type of metals and stones worn as jewelry and the use of cotton rather than maguey fiber in mantles, demonstrated and institutionalized the status of the nobility and widened the gap between them and the commoners. Moreover, these status differences were

now more easily implemented as a consequence of the nobles' greater wealth from tribute.

At the same time, this increased wealth profoundly affected Aztec marriage patterns. It is likely that polygyny to any significant extent had previously been limited to the king and his sons as a function of wealth if not of law, but the practice now greatly expanded. Polygyny in imperial Aztec society was not merely an affectation or a flaunting of wealth, but was also essential to the maintenance of the growing empire. While that empire only began under Itzcoatl and remained relatively small during his reign, it burgeoned under Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina.

As a hegemonic empire, the Aztecs depended on the tributaries policing themselves once they were conquered or intimidated into acquiescence. The alternative—controlling the tributaries directly—would have quickly consumed the Aztecs' military manpower and greatly hobbled the further expansion of their empire. But by leaving the local political officeholders in place and moving on, Aztec forces were not consumed in domestic control duties and were free to continue their military conquests.

The psychological effect of having been conquered, which left local rulers with the certain knowledge that the Aztecs could conquer them again, ensured considerable compliance with subsequent Aztec wishes. And the demands laid on tributaries by the Aztecs were relatively minor: they were required to pay tribute in Tenochtitlan, typically four designated times a year (at least by the time of the Spanish conquest), and they had to maintain the local roads, establish porters (*tlamemes*) in their main towns if none existed previously, and plant designated lands to supply future Aztec armies with foodstuffs en route.

Local cultural practices remained unchanged, existing rulers continued to rule, and no gods or religious rites were imposed. But other consequences came with tributary status, both pro and con. Once in the empire, Aztec merchants imported both finished wares and raw materials otherwise unavailable locally, notably luxury goods. And in order to keep track of when tribute was owed in Tenochtitlan, tributaries had to adopt the Aztec calendar in tandem with their domestic one, if not as a replacement. Although the same basic calendar of 365 days divided into eighteen 20-day months plus five "empty" days running alongside a ritual cycle of 260 days of twenty 13-day periods was widespread throughout Mesoamerica, the

Aztec starting day differed, as did its year, and tributaries adopted these in their own calendars to create a vast, synchronous imperial unity.⁴⁶

But most important here was the impact of conquest on elite marital ties. In a pivotal study, Pedro Carrasco detailed how the ruling elites of central Mexico were linked by intermarriage, with the king possessing wives given by the rulers of his many allied towns.⁴⁷ By receiving and marrying the daughters of subordinate kings, the entire empire was gradually linked into an interconnected web of kinship: the Aztec king had wives related to many if not most of his subordinate rulers, and those rulers in turn had wives from their own subordinate towns. And the offspring of these unions were often returned to their mother's cities to succeed the rulers there.

This system of linking allies, and especially linking tributary kingdoms to the imperial capital, stimulated Aztec elite polygyny to an unprecedented extent. The expansion of the empire, particularly under Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, increased the need for royal daughters who could be married to newly tributary rulers. Royal polygyny therefore increased over normal elite polygyny to a degree that may be termed hyperpolygyny and was most tellingly illustrated by King Nezahualpilli's two thousand-plus wives and concubines.

This ambitious marriage practice was not restricted to the kings. Once the Aztecs adopted their new system of royal succession, it opened up the possibility of reaching the throne to a far wider group of upper nobles than previously. The existence of that expanded candidate pool, in turn, generated an increased need for multiple marriages among the nobility. Moreover, would-be successors to the throne could not afford to wait until they were crowned to begin marrying multiple women and producing children. All such pretenders necessarily began their polygynous marriages far in advance of any possibility of reaching the throne and did so with the most advantageous connections possible.

The king needed marriage-age daughters to be able to cement alliances with allied and tributary cities, but he could not afford to wait until they reached the throne to begin producing offspring. Most Aztec kings did not rule long enough for post-accession daughters to reach maturity and wed: they needed daughters early and often. Daughters enhanced their candidacy prior to accession by creating political ties to other lineages through these wives. And because the possibility of becoming king was now open to all royal sons and others closely linked to the throne, many

young men, as well as established and prestigious older ones, competed for the politically most desirable women. Thus, the practice of polygyny greatly increased in imperial Tenochtitlan over its incidence in the pre-imperial state and expanded to include virtually all of the sons of all of the kings, rather than primarily the sons of the reigning king, thereby creating many hyperpolygynous upper nobles. This more robust practice of polygyny necessarily meant that kings and the enlarged pool of potential successors would marry women of various ranks, as not enough women of equal social status were available to satisfy this growing demand.

This circumstance likely prompted Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina to enact another law decreeing that the sons of kings or upper nobles born of commoners or slaves were to be considered their legitimate sons and descended from their blood. And if they showed courage in war, they were to inherit from their fathers, whereas their legitimate sons who were cowardly were to lose their inheritance.⁴⁸ In other words, paternity remained paramount, but individual accomplishment could greatly enhance one's standing.

This move to legitimate the children of nobles may also have been spurred by the widespread practice of concubinage in Aztec society. Although concubinage can occur in both polygynous and monogamous societies, it is not true marriage and is accordingly distinguished by its practitioners.⁴⁹ However, concubines are not simply sexual outlets, and in monogamous societies that permit concubines, the resulting sons are often recognized as heirs when the legitimate wife fails to produce any, as in traditional China and ancient Israel.⁵⁰

Concubinage offers the possibility of a relationship that is less than marriage and yet is socially recognized as legitimate and, presumably, exclusive, at least on the woman's part. In some societies, ties of concubinage were made with women who would not be socially suitable wives, such as lower-caste women in Hindu society or Muslim women in Hindu society and vice versa. As concubines, such women allow rulers to establish connections and perhaps even alliances to groups with which formal marriages are prohibited or at least socially or religiously ill advised.⁵¹ But prohibited status does not necessarily distinguish concubines from wives, and the nobles of some societies drew upon the same social group for both.⁵² So while concubinage offers the possibility of legitimate sexual access to additional women in monogamous societies, why would polygynous societies permit it in the

absence of some social, ethnic, or religious status that prohibited the formal marriage of some women?

Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina's new law acknowledging the legitimacy of noble children by commoner wives did not mean maternity was now inconsequential. Although royal or noble paternity could elevate a mother's lower social circumstances, maternity remained important, especially among the nobility. However nominally important paternity was decreed to be, the political links created by an advantageous marriage to an elite woman remained paramount.

Although not directly altering the social system, Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina also established a school for commoners (*telpochcalli*) in each ward. Every commoner boy would receive professional military training nearly comparable to that of the nobles and thereby increase the effectiveness of the Aztec army.⁵³

During his reign, as often happens in new empires, Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina took steps to create an ideological basis that would justify the Aztecs' new dominant status and serve to integrate their expanding empire. He dispatched an expedition to the north in search of the Aztec legendary homeland of Aztlan.⁵⁴ The Aztecs' account of their migration was riddled with supernatural portents. The people were guided by four clan leaders (three men and one woman) from their island home to their first mainland stop, a town named Colhuacan or Divine Colhuacan. There they received their patron god, Huitzilopochtli, and thereafter carried him with them. After many years of wandering punctuated with stops of varying durations, they reached the Valley of Mexico and finally settled at another city also named Colhuacan, before at last settling their capital, which was again on an island in a lake.

Prior to arriving in the Valley of Mexico, the Aztecs, whose name means "People of Aztlan," changed their name to Mexica, which means "People of Mexico," a place they had not yet reached and of which they were presumably unaware. But what was a Mexica? It referred to one living there, in the Valley of Mexico. With the expansion of the empire not only throughout the valley but far beyond, however, Aztec became a cultural identity based on the myth of the original wandering tribes from Aztlan.⁵⁵ So while royal Aztec offspring were married into distant tributary ruling families and became natives of those places by virtue of descent, they could claim the bloodline of the Aztecs as well, which aided their offspring in maintaining ties to Tenochtitlan.



Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina died in 1468, having ruled for twenty-eight years. He had implemented a law to legitimize meritorious children by commoner wives, perhaps because he had no sons by his noble wives. But the law had no apparent impact on the selection of his successor because the decision did not belong to him; under the new system, the choice was now made by others after the king's death. And since Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina reportedly died with only a legitimate daughter and no legitimate sons, Axayacatl was selected to succeed him as king.⁵⁶ Whether or not Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina actually had no legitimate sons, since any he may have had were in all likelihood born by his earliest and thus probably legitimate wives, such sons would have been relatively old, at least in their forties, and perhaps seen as not vigorous enough for the position. In any event, none of Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina's immediate descendants appears to have succeeded to the throne.

Some historical accounts claim that Axayacatl was Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina's son.⁵⁷ But the vast majority of sources, and the most genealogically detailed and specific, list Axayacatl as the son of Tezozomoc, a lord of Tenochtitlan who was himself the son of King Itzcoatl. Axayacatl, however, was also the grandson of Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina by his legitimate daughter, Atotoztli, whose mother, a noblewoman and the daughter of the king of Cuauhnahuac, had been Moteuczoma's wife.⁵⁸ Thus, Axayacatl would not have been the son of a king, but he was the grandson of two kings, Itzcoatl and Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina.

The choice of Axayacatl had the virtue of uniting the traditional ruling line of Tenochtitlan, embodied by Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, with that of Itzcoatl, who founded the empire and some of whose descendants had achieved powerful positions in Tenochtitlan. Although no rifts are especially evident in the historical accounts, Axayacatl's selection may also have avoided a power struggle between the two potential factions.

Axayacatl ruled for only thirteen years and was an active military leader but had a mixed record in expanding the empire, including a major failure against the Tarascan empire to the west, although he won major victories on the Gulf Coast shortly thereafter. When he died, he was succeeded by his older brother Tizoc.



Tizoc's reign was notable for its lack of military success. He fought few wars and failed to expand the empire, although he did publically claim military successes, as seen on the Stone of Tizoc. The cities claimed as victories on that stone, however, were largely those already conquered by Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, and the primary purpose of the stone appears to have been to link the empire of Tizoc's reign to the earlier and much-mythologized Toltec empire by depicting the Aztec conquerors with Toltec arms and armor, even though these had long since been superseded. Tizoc did, however, further alter the social system that had been instituted by Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina.

Because the *telpochcalli* promoted the better military training of commoners, those who excelled in war, as exemplified by their taking four captives or performing other notable deeds, could be promoted to eagle nobles (*cuaubpipiltin*; sing. *cuaubpilli*).⁵⁹ This Mexican equivalent of being knighted conferred lower noble (*pilli*) status upon the warrior, which his children could inherit, and also allowed these warriors to own land and have multiple wives.⁶⁰ A similar process existed in medieval Europe, where war did not merely benefit the elite but created them as well, along with well-compensated sinecures, and the Aztecs were in a state of continual war, although it is perhaps the opportunities opened to the military to enrich themselves that are most relevant here. In any event, this promotion was reportedly the single best way of rising socially in Aztec society.⁶¹

This opportunity had apparently opened the floodgates of upward social mobility by the time of Tizoc's reign, so he instituted a change designed to limit it. Instead of allowing warriors to become nobles for taking four captives, he required that they capture warriors from Huexotzinco.⁶²

Huexotzinco was targeted at that time because the Aztecs were engaged in a flower war with its people, which involved far fewer warriors on both sides, thus reducing the number of commoners involved. Only the best would be fighting on each side, so taking an enemy captive from Huexotzinco in a flower war was significantly more difficult than taking one in an ordinary war of conquest. While the new requirement elevated the status of the honor, it simultaneously diminished the likelihood that commoner warriors could meet that new standard and become nobles by this route.

This change aside, Tizoc was a lackluster leader and the effect of his inattention to the empire was not only no increase in the influx of tribute upon which the growing noble class depended but making the empire appear weak or unconcerned. And in the absence of institutional changes in its far-flung tributaries or the stationing of troops throughout the empire to impose imperial will, many cities that had been conquered previously ceased to fear reprisals and stopped paying their tribute.



Tizoc ruled for an exceptionally short time, just four and a half years, and was still relatively young when he died in 1486. Reportedly, his death was the result of his either being poisoned or cursed by a witch from Ixtlapalapan.⁶³ After his death, he was succeeded by yet another brother, Ahuizotl, over some opposition. Ahuizotl was younger than Tizoc had been when he was chosen to be king and had not yet been to war, likely because of his youth but perhaps also as a result of Tizoc's lack of military adventurism.⁶⁴ Despite his inexperience, Ahuizotl proved to be an exceptional military leader as king and carried out a series of expansions of the Aztec empire, reaching all the way into present-day Guatemala along the Pacific coast. But his reign, too, was cut short. After a successful sixteen years, while still a young man, Ahuizotl fell sick with a strange, untreatable withering disease, possibly the result of poison, and died in 1502.⁶⁵



Ancient Mexican kingdoms operated on accepted rules of legitimate succession, though what these rules were differed among the various states. Nevertheless, not all kings lived out their natural lives. While it is true that war presented a hazard to noble and commoner alike, none of Tenochtitlan's kings died in battle, although Ahuizotl at least had been wounded in war. But a number of kings nevertheless met untimely ends.

Political assassinations were neither rare in Mesoamerica nor limited to the Aztecs. Indeed, in political systems in which succession is not fixed and determinate, there is competition and, commonly, assassination. And the same is true of polities that both define some successors and eliminate others, such as confederacies, not because each king's successor is unknown,

but because the multiple rulers are in competition with each other. Thus, for instance, Tlaxcaltec nobles were known to assassinate kings in order to assume their places, and Tezozomoc assassinated rival kings and installed his sons on the thrones of their cities. The murder of Tayauh is perhaps the most famous example.⁶⁶ Although Tayauh had been designated heir by his father, Tezozomoc, who founded and ruled the Tepanec empire, he was one among many brother-kings, and Maxtlatl, his brother and fellow aspirant, assassinated him to assume his position.⁶⁷

Whereas not all, and perhaps not even most, cases of untimely Aztec royal deaths are known to be assassinations, early royal deaths nevertheless litter Aztec political history. Of Tenochtitlan's eight pre-Cortesian rulers, at least three appear to have been assassinated. Chimalpopoca was unquestionably assassinated, though who was behind the act is less than certain: the Tepanecs were blamed, but Itzcoatl benefitted the most.⁶⁸ Tizoc likewise appears to have been assassinated with poison, though witchcraft was also blamed.⁶⁹ And Ahuitzotl seems to have been poisoned as well since he died, possibly of wounds but allegedly of a strange disease, while still young and at the height of his success.⁷⁰ Moreover, the Aztecs themselves saw all three instances as probable assassinations. There are also reasons to suspect even more assassinations among the Aztec royalty than these three relatively obvious examples. The deaths of others are not always satisfactorily explained, as in the case of Itzcoatl's death from sickness at a relatively young age. And in addition, the last three Aztec emperors were killed directly or indirectly by the Spaniards. Moteuczoma Xocoyotl was killed either when he was struck by stones thrown by the Aztecs, as the Spaniards maintained, or when he was stabbed to death by the Spaniards, as the Aztecs more plausibly claimed.⁷¹ Cuitlahua died of smallpox brought by the Spaniards. And Cuauhtemoc was hanged by Cortés.

Of the three most probable indigenous assassinations, only one—that of Tizoc—can be blamed on poor performance in office. The rest, including Tayauh's assassination, were related not to actions but, most likely, to whose advancement was being obstructed.



Jack Goody describes how brothers succeeding to the throne creates tension within the next generation of potential successors.⁷² Such was the case

among the Aztecs, which points to more complications in the Aztec system of royal succession.

Requiring descent from the royal patriline plus military skill significantly limited the pool of potential successors to the throne, although many royal Aztec sons, grandsons, cousins, and nephews still met the requirements. But because only one would succeed to the throne, further considerations had to be made about who was selected. And these had to do not with the individual candidates, but with the dynamics of generational cohorts, both royal and lordly.

Selection, or “election” as it is often described, was by the upper nobles. These lords, in turn, were appointed to lifetime positions by the king. But what was the relationship between the lords and those who would be king? If succession were dictated by some inheritance principle, however loosely defined, one would expect the king to reach the throne and then appoint his supporters to lordly positions as they became available. But this scenario does not appear to describe the Aztec case. Rather, the lords selected the king—the candidate whose supporters held these positions was elected. Nobles who were interrelated thereby achieved lordly office and then elevated one of their number to the throne.

A hegemonic system demands both an able and mature king, but not one so old that his death is imminent. After all, he must be able to impress his tributaries with his ability to enforce his dictates. He should be relatively long lived because each succession was a time of political uncertainty until the new king demonstrated his ability, and the more frequent the kingly successions were, the less influential any given ruler would be and the likelier that a poor leader would emerge who would undermine the tributary system. The Aztec imperial case required a mature man as king, typically someone in his thirties: Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina at forty-three was the oldest man ever selected, whereas Ahuitzotl at around twenty had to overcome considerable resistance, perhaps as a result of that youth. Political considerations alone did not mandate the age for succession, however. Another concern was that the king be old enough to have, or soon have, daughters of marriageable age.

Because of the growing practice of royal polygyny, many royal sons were born, but very few ever became king. Although royal descent was necessary for a man to succeed to the throne, the royal patriline alone was not a sufficient qualification. The essential characteristic required was not simply

descent from a royal patriline, but from a powerful matriline as well. The royal sons who reached the throne descended from influential matriline, whereas many of their half brothers did not.

A powerful matriline does not suggest that women per se were the crucial variable. Rather, it was the role of women as mothers, wives, and sisters, linking the royal household to other powerful lords and nobles, that was crucial. Moreover, there was no single important matriline but many, as polygyny inevitably gives rise to powerful lords with many ties to other lords and kings by marriage, producing a tightly knit kin group spread through the ruling lords' houses.

Maintaining such links was important to the continued political viability of the lords' houses, and virtually all of them likely had close kin ties, by blood or marriage, to the various Aztec kings.⁷³ But each new king would essentially alter the existing closeness of the kin ties between the various lords' houses. These lords chose which pretender would succeed to the throne, and since their relationships with the king were of paramount importance to their own positions, it is unlikely that any of them would lack close ties to the newly selected king.



More than simply possessing ties to other powerful lineages through their mothers, royal successors of the same or allied lineages functioned within cohorts to place and keep their members on the throne.

A cohort can be any self-aware grouping, and these undoubtedly arose among the king's sons. The nucleus of such a cohort would be the royal sons by the same mother, as they would then share all the same kin ties. The same tight connections of interests may form among brothers in monogamous systems, too, but a single woman seldom produced enough sons to generate a powerful cohort, queen or not. Only in polygynous societies, and especially with the hyperpolygyny of the Aztec ruling families, were large enough clusters of brothers and half brothers produced to yield large, closely linked, and effective fraternal cohorts with shared concerns, able to act as an effective interest group.

Although the main focus of these cohorts was the patrilineage, they necessarily included royal sons by other mothers, even though these half brothers would not likely ever ascend to the throne themselves. The cohort

springing from the king and his most politically important wife would likely be the most central, depending on the personal qualities of their sons at the time of succession. But royal sons by other mothers would also be members. Their interests would not be entirely consistent with those of the son by both the king and his most important wife, but as members of the cohort, they were significant in helping form a large enough group to become politically important. Moreover, joining such cohorts was crucial to more peripheral members of the royal family, as they were too marginal to form their own cohorts of equal power and significance. Any such sub-grouping within the king's offspring would be both ineffectual and ultimately counterproductive, for it would alienate its members from potential holders of power who would later determine their fates.

A similar dynamic may have operated in other central Mexican cities, but in Tenochtitlan the shift from royal succession by direct descent to selection from among the upper nobles with the attendant increase in polygynous unions greatly amplified the process. In Tenochtitlan many more possible successors contended for power, so more viable cohorts could be formed to promote candidates who were central to these groups. But elsewhere, since only royal sons were in contention, the power bloc was restricted primarily to the king's family and was thus less pivotal, the decision resting more with the king. Presumably, the most able son typically prevailed, which often meant the oldest son, or at least one old enough to have the requisite experience. This was also true of the early Aztec kings through the reign of Chimalpopoca. But with his assassination and the elimination of his direct line, Itzcoatl took power, ending succession by direct descent. Thereafter, other close kin of previous kings also contended for power. Concentrating power exclusively among the kin of kings and upper nobles was not a rule per se, but it was these families, oriented around the throne and the lords' houses, who were wealthy, influential, and connected enough to vie for the throne.

This new succession system was tied less to the rise of the Aztec empire than to the truncation of the reigning lineage at Chimalpopoca's death at the same time that a new basis of power was being established. In the Tepanec empire and in Tetzaco, royal sons typically occupied lordly positions. In the Aztec empire, however, these positions were more broadly based, perhaps because they arose when the previous lineage was superseded.

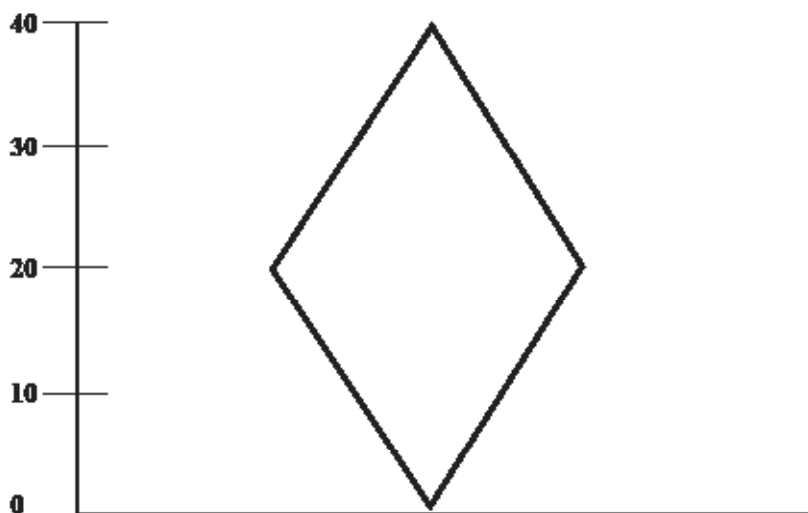


CHART 1. An idealized depiction of royal offspring. Those at the apex are the earliest offspring of the future king when he had the fewest wives. Then, as he gains status, he acquires increasing numbers of wives and has more offspring as depicted at the middle of the diamond. Thereafter, despite having numerous wives, his reproduction declines for a variety of reasons, including lessened sexual potency with age.

In imperial Tenochtitlan, with many lords' houses and their affiliated kin vying for power and most of them having cross-cutting kin ties to the other lords as well as to kings, past or present, multiple cohorts formed. Some individuals were more peripheral to their respective blocs and could more easily shift their allegiances to other blocs with which they shared other ties. And as in any power struggles, some blocs lacked the power to hold on to all their members. In short, Aztec power blocs were often overlapping and fluid, especially at the fringes.

Beyond possessing the formal qualifications for the office and having an effective cohort, a candidate for king also needed to consider cohort positioning, which had two key aspects: the age of the generational cohort in relation to competing cohorts and the position of the candidate within his own cohort.

A generational cohort may be visualized as diamond shaped over time, with the oldest sons at the apex, the youngest at the bottom, and the

majority at the middle bulge (chart 1). This age distribution is a function of the lineage founder (usually the king in a successful cohort) being young and having few wives when he sires his first offspring, then acquiring more wives and producing more offspring, and finally producing fewer offspring as he ages and his own reproductive ability declines despite his likely having the most wives of his life at this time. For purposes of illustration, such a cohort can be seen as lasting, say, sixty years. That sixty-year span begins with an initial group of members in the first twenty years or so, when its members are too young, inexperienced, and unimportant to be politically

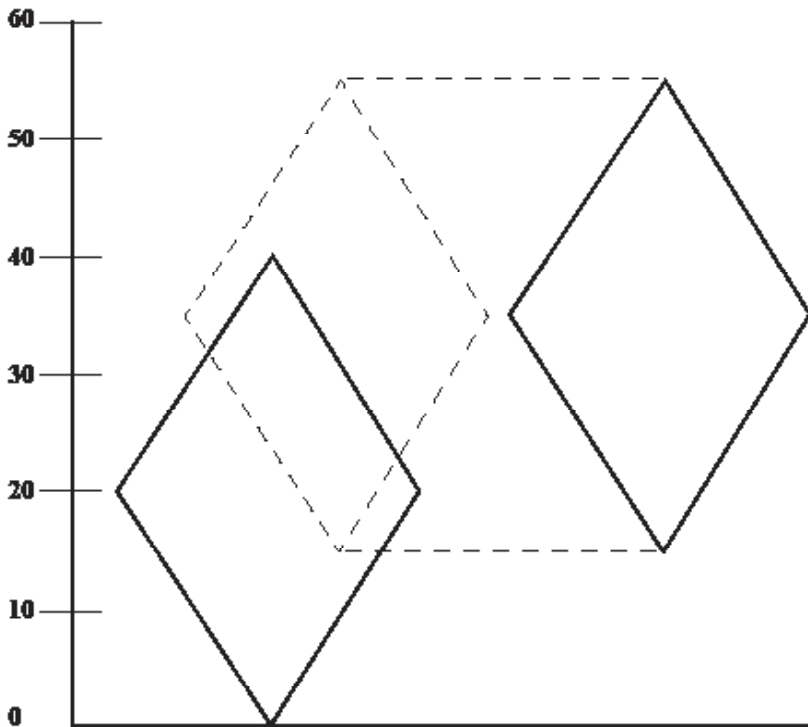


CHART 2. An idealized depiction of royal offspring, forming a cohort that is most numerous and thus strongest in its middle years. With time, membership in that cohort declines and other cohorts emerge. One is depicted in dotted lines, as cohorts necessarily have massively overlapping kin ties. The cohort depicted in solid lines beside the earlier cohort illustrates its growing numbers and strength at the same time that the original ruling cohort is declining.

significant: the top of the emerging diamond. During the next twenty years, the cohort expands to its maximum numbers, with the youngest still being relatively unimportant but the previously initial group now falling in the twenty- to forty-year age range, the optimal period for achieving military experience, holding important offices, marrying into other important lordly lines, and being the most likely candidates to ascend to the throne: the middle of the diamond. In the last twenty years, the newest group is smaller again, and the older group preceding them is rapidly aging. Although potentially important in support of the rest of the cohort, this group will reach the optimal age for achievement at the same time the king is no longer producing offspring, leaving them with no additional support from an up-and-coming age group: the bottom of the diamond (chart 2). Such competing cohorts are not distinct and separate groups but overlap with other cohorts and differ less in their kin connections—many of which they share with the ruling cohort—than in where they branch off. For example, Moteuczoma Xocoyotl was a younger member of the ruling cohort of Axayacatl, Tizoc, and Ahuitzotl but could also distinguish the group closer to himself that formed the Axayacatl lineage. Thus, “competition” between cohorts is circumscribed by kin networks such that the various cohorts from which rulers emerge should be seen less as multiple, competing cohorts than as a single, interrelated cohort cluster.

As the generational cohort first emerges, its members wield little influence. Furthermore, the oldest members of the cohort are likely sons by the king’s earliest wives. Acquired while he was still only an aspirant to the throne and while he was competing with other influential members of the nobility, these women are in all likelihood less politically important than those acquired after he reached the throne. Thus, the king’s oldest sons only have ties to less influential matrikin and are less likely to achieve the throne in their own right, at least initially.

Only with time does the cohort increase in numbers enough to be influential, which at least partly explains why the oldest royal sons typically do not become king, at least not first among their cohort. The oldest members must first gain positions of power, as lords or commanding generals, but even when the first few of a cohort do so, they are still few in number and unlikely to be selected as king should their father die. Thus, for example, Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina was the third legitimate son of Huitzilihuitl, not the eldest. But as the cohort ages and increases in numbers and influence, the oldest assist

in elevating a younger brother, and only later, after the younger brother has been king and promoted his siblings (and offspring), will the older brother have enough other supporters in place to be elevated to king.

Of course, the generational cohort continues to age, and although the new king will have offspring, they are likely to be too young to take power on the death of their father. They nevertheless represent his lineage, rather than that of their grandfather, which is what had united the generational cohort that put their father on the throne. They therefore do not have the full support of the previous royal cohort.

At the same time, however, other generational cohorts have claims to the throne, typically stemming from the lineages of earlier kings. For example, Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina was not only the third son, but he ruled for twenty-eight years, by which time any of his generational cohort would undoubtedly have been too old to ascend the throne, so a new generational cohort came to power thereafter, elevating his grandchildren rather than his children.

Adding to the complexity of these generational cohorts is the longevity of their sires. A shift from one cohort holding power to another only occurs after the death of the king, even if some of those deaths are hastened. Shorter reigns produce fewer offspring since an increasing number of a king's marriages occur after he ascends the throne, and shorter reigns necessarily create fewer marital alliances with other kings and nobles because fewer daughters are produced in such short time periods. Consequently, cohorts produced by such kings are smaller, younger, and weaker.

Nevertheless, dense cohorts produced within a relatively short time are also the most coherent, with the greatest number of shared interests. These cohorts are likely the royal ones, concentrated in the reproductive lifespan of one man. Matrilineal cohorts also exist, but these focus on royal wives plus their brothers, fathers, uncles, and descendants; they are more dispersed in time and in interests and therefore are less powerful and more quickly dissipate with time.

Cohorts that are too young or too old when the king dies are likely to be passed over as pools of candidates for succession, if they have formed at all. Immature sons are unlikely to become kings in the face of all the available competent candidates. But if a king remains in power too long, as was the case with Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, the cohort that should logically have succeeded him may be too old to do so. If they and their supporters

have passed their peak, so that not only is their candidate older than desirable but the peak number of cohort members is already declining, another younger cohort may be better positioned to succeed.

Even though cohorts focused on the king are more powerful than those focused on the queen, cohorts emerging from long reigns tend to spread out over a larger age range and might tend to segment into several cohorts, although it is far likelier that any competing cohort will form around the offspring of another king entirely, as each king was the potential founder of a new cohort through his sons. Any cohort that actually segmented would likely remerge in the interests of promoting its sibling cohort over outsider cohorts.

When Axayacatl died, he had been in office for only thirteen years, so his own cohort was still relatively young, although its members had almost certainly increased in power during his reign. In any event, he was then succeeded by his older brother Tizoc. On Tizoc's death after four and a half years in office, the original cohort that had put both Axayacatl and Tizoc on the throne would have been aging, having been in power for some seventeen or eighteen years, but as this period was not yet a full generation, their cohort apparently remained strong enough to put a third member, Ahuitzotl, on the throne, too. There was nevertheless opposition to his ascension, phrased in terms of his youth, but this opposition likely masked the emergence of a younger competing cohort that had not quite reached its maximal power and that sought to push aside the aging Axayacatl/Tizoc/Ahuitzotl cohort, although they were unsuccessful at this time. These three brothers becoming king in sequence was unique in Aztec history, but the combined terms of Axayacatl and Tizoc were still shorter than Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina's had been. Even adding Ahuitzotl's term, their total time in power was only six years longer than Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina's, after whose death there had been a cohort shift.

It is likely that Axayacatl, Tizoc, and Ahuitzotl's cohort emerged during a unique time in Aztec history and derived its support not directly from the previous king, but by linking the lineages of both Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina and Itzcoatl, as well as all their affiliated kin. Entire generational cohorts that did not achieve power were comprised of the offspring of both Itzcoatl and Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, following the latter's reign. These older cohorts, which might have competed with Axayacatl/Tizoc/Ahuitzotl's, were likely somewhat past their prime by the time the first of

the three brothers began his reign. It would take the emergence of an entirely new lineage based on a more recent king to challenge the three brothers' cohort, which is apparently what happened. When Ahuitzotl died, he was still a young man and had been an extremely successful military leader who had returned the Aztec empire to the peak of its power. Ahuitzotl's personal qualifications as king were excellent, but the cohort that had placed him on the throne was aging, and another younger and powerful cohort had emerged. But time was against it. If that challenger cohort had merely waited for Ahuitzotl's natural death, it, too, might have aged and weakened and thereby missed its chance to place a member on the throne. Thus, when Ahuitzotl died, another powerful cohort emerged and did not merely displace the aging cohort that put Ahuitzotl on the throne, but likely had a hand in the king's untimely death.

Ruling for too long could put a king in danger of assassination, no matter how successful he had been. Other powerful lineages may well have wished for the end of the reign of the seated king before he had ruled more than twenty years and before his own sons had become age-appropriate candidates for succession yet while their own kin were still likely candidates for king. Such early deaths were the fates of all the kings after Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina until the reign of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl.



The king who succeeded Ahuitzotl was Moteuczoma Xocoyotl, the son of King Axayacatl and a noblewoman from Ixtlapalapan. Axayacatl had been promoted by a cohort of his collateral kin that included both Tizoc and Ahuitzotl, but he was also the nucleus of his own lineage, around which a new cohort formed, although his sons were all too young to be viable candidates at the time of his death. That new generational cohort was not only young and irrelevant at the time of his death, but they were still too young when Tizoc was elected. It is also likely this cohort had objected to succession of Ahuitzotl in 1486 but was still not powerful enough to be decisive. Nevertheless, as the Axayacatl/Tizoc/Ahuitzotl cohort aged, diminishing Ahuitzotl's support, a member of the emergent Axayacatl-descent cohort was finally chosen, and Moteuczoma Xocoyotl came to power in 1502, following his predecessor's suspicious death.⁷⁴ Moteuczoma Xocoyotl carried out a number of successful military campaigns, increasing the wealth of

Tenochtitlan, but at the same time he reversed some of the social reforms of his great-grandfather Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina.

Moteuczoma Xocoyotl decreed that commoners could no longer serve in the palace, whether born of kings or noblemen, if they were illegitimate. Only the legitimate offspring of both noblemen and noblewomen would be allowed. He also removed all commoners who served as officials and tutors to the royal children, as well as the women who watched his wives and concubines, and replaced them with nobles.⁷⁵ Although not couched in these terms, polygyny among the nobles was apparently producing too many offspring to be absorbed, and the means of paring back these numbers that was most acceptable to the existing nobility was to cast out their offspring by commoner mothers and concubines. But additionally, the removal of important officials put into office by Ahuitzotl ensured a more complete shift in power from the latter's cohort to Moteuczoma Xocoyotl's.

The last Aztec emperor chosen independent of Spanish influence, Moteuczoma Xocoyotl ruled when Cortés arrived, and he was killed in June 1520, almost certainly by the Spaniards.⁷⁶ His successor was then chosen in the shadow of the Spanish threat, although they had already been driven out of the capital.

In anticipation of their own flight, the Spaniards also killed some forty other kings and lords, significantly thinning the ranks of Aztec allies and potential successors. Despite Moteuczoma Xocoyotl having alienated many of his people and allied kings by failing to act decisively against the Spaniards, his eighteen years of rule had apparently consolidated the power of his cohort by the time of his death.



Whether it was this consolidation, the fewer surviving candidates to choose from, or the fact that he had opposed Moteuczoma Xocoyotl's policy of appeasement toward the Spaniards, Moteuczoma Xocoyotl's brother Cuitlahua was selected as the next king. Married to one of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl's daughters, Cuitlahua was also a member of the Axayacatl cohort and an excellent choice to oppose the Spaniards, but he was struck down by the smallpox epidemic that reached the Valley of Mexico in the fall of 1520 and died, having ruled for only eighty days.⁷⁷ Cuitlahua likely died in early December 1520, just a few weeks before Cortés and his Tlaxcaltec allies reentered the Valley of Mexico.



A successor to Cuitlahua was chosen, but amid the political defections, smallpox, and uncertainties afflicting the rulers of the surrounding cities, the group of potential candidates had thinned markedly. Either because few alternative candidates were still alive or, more likely, because the Axayacatl-centered cohort of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl and Cuitlahua was aging owing to Moteuczoma's long reign, the next king chosen was Cuauhtemoc, son of Ahuitzotl, who was formally inaugurated in February of 1521. Cuauhtemoc was the nephew of both Moteuczoma Xocoyotl and Cuitlahua and was the former's son-in-law as well, but his selection nevertheless represented another cohort shift to the lineage of Ahuitzotl.⁷⁸ Despite his valiant efforts to defend Tenochtitlan and repel the Spaniards, Cuauhtemoc's reign cannot be judged a success. He was forced to surrender his capital to the Spaniards on August 13, 1521, and was thereafter a puppet ruler. He was hanged by Cortés some five years later. No subsequent Aztec rulers were freely chosen by the indigenous nobility.



Based on the logic of royal succession elsewhere, an Aztec ruler is typically defined in terms of his relation to the previous king. After the first king (I), the successors, each in relation to the previous king, were son (II), son (III), uncle (IV), nephew (V), grandson (VI), brother (VII), brother (VIII), nephew (IX), brother (X), and cousin (XI). But focusing primarily on descent obscures a more significant pattern. Beginning with the first king (I), the Aztec rulers fall into related clusters: descendants of II (III, V), descendant of I (IV), descendants of IV and V (VI, VII, VIII), descendants of VI (IX, X), and descendant of VIII (XI).

In the imperial era, Itzcoatl, who was the son of Acamapichtli but was otherwise an anomalous case, ruled for thirteen years and was both preceded and followed by sons of Huitzilihuitl (who ruled for ten and twenty-eight years, respectively), followed by the grandsons of Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina and Itzcoatl (thirty-four years), followed by sons of Axayacatl (eighteen years), followed by a son of Ahuitzotl (five years). But what does this have to do with succession dynamics?

Because the Aztec throne was occupied for the short period of 149 years,

55 pre-imperial years and only 94 years as an empire before the fall of Tenochtitlan, the sample is small and the effective portions even smaller since the last three kings ruled and died in unusual circumstances during and after the arrival of the Spaniards. Still, the imperial/pre-Conquest pattern illustrates that a royal house took the throne and held it for twenty to thirty years, just over a generation, before being superseded by a collateral royal line.

What underlies this phenomenon? It is not the age of the king himself, since Ahuitzotl was only around thirty-six when he died. Nor is it the exhaustion of potential successors within that royal house, as Ahuitzotl left sons and there were doubtless other members of the Axayacatl/Tizoc/Ahuitzotl lineage, given the polygynous nature of Aztec elite society. The cause of the shift in royal lines was not the aging of individuals but of their generational cohort as a whole.

If we presume for this analysis that the vast bulk of an Aztec nobleman's sons were born during the roughly three decades following his marriage at twenty or so, these sons would form a relatively coherent group from ages zero through thirty. They would only begin entering the upper reaches of Aztec society on their majority and with their most significant accomplishments occurring in their midtwenties. And if the reigning king did not die until he was sixty, his sons would then be from nine to thirty years of age, with better than half eligible (though not necessarily selected) to become lords. Even after the death of the reigning king, many of his sons were likely to be chosen as lords or achieve important political or military offices, forming a chronological bloc spanning some thirty years. At both the beginning of this bloc's entry into the elite ranks of Aztec society and at the end as its members passed their prime, aged, and died, the kin bloc was numerically smaller and weaker than other competing cohorts. In short, a royal generational cohort would get its first foothold in power when the members' father approached fifty-five years of age, peak fifteen years later, and enjoy this strength over a fifteen-year period before its own power started to wane. Whether this monopolization of power would continue depended on who were appointed successor lords and officeholders, which depended in turn on the political alliances of the reigning king. But what this generational analysis suggests is that Aztec kings did not take the throne and then appoint their followers to positions of power. Rather, powerful generational cohorts reached positions of power and then appointed one of their number to be king.

In a king-first situation, a potential successor's age is not a key consideration, and typically the eldest son will succeed to the throne. In a supporters-first situation, however, age is a factor. Political stability demands that a successor not be too old when he takes the throne to avoid a rapid series of successors, each of whom would have to prove their mettle. But successfully placing a member of one's generational cohort on the throne depends on having a powerful bloc. This strength is built up through time, with the result that the oldest sons become lords first and build their bloc into a powerful force. Although these sons are not yet too old to be acceptable candidates for the throne, they likely use enough political capital in getting other members of their cohort into positions of power that their own attractiveness as candidates diminishes in the eyes of the other cohorts, and the selection falls on middle sons rather than the eldest.

As the oldest royal sons mature and marry, they also acquire matrikin whose interests they must consider. For this reason, the older sons support younger kings, both because of the dynamics of cohort size and because they are in a position to see which brother's ascension might best favor their own future prospects. Huitzilihuitl, for example, was the fourth son of seven, Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina was the third of five (or thirteen), Moteuczoma Xocoyotl was the seventh child, and Cuitlahua was the eighth.⁷⁹ A parallel dynamic works on the young end of the generational cohort and also diminishes the prospects of the youngest sons, as the cohort's numbers and power wane.

Succession is not, however, a normal and natural consequence of generational aging. In any span of years, one cohort may be dominant, but other cohorts containing royal sons, both waxing and waning, compete with the dominant one. And it is this intergenerational competition that largely accounts for the stability of descent clusters over time, as well as the abrupt shifts in power from one cohort to another before all potential candidates from the earlier one have been exhausted. For example, the grandsons of Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina and Itzcoatl took power, and three ruled in succession, despite considerable opposition to the last, which suggests the growing strength of a competing kin bloc. After his death, succession shifted to a younger collateral cohort, the descendants of Axayacatl, foreclosing forever the prospects of the previous ruling generation.

Polygyny and Progeny

UP TO THIS point, studies of polygyny have focused on the advantages it gave men. But the biological consequences of polygyny often confounded its intended social purposes. As we have virtually no information on the biology of reproduction among the pre-Columbian Aztecs, the following analysis necessarily relies on comparative and biological studies whose results may then be used to cast light on the Aztec situation.

The reproductive advantages of polygyny are not always what they are assumed to be. Actual studies of polygynous unions suggest that fewer men than women will contribute genetically to succeeding generations.¹ This outcome is illustrated by the exceptional case of Genghis Khan, who, through formal marriages and other unions, sired so many children in his lifetime that today sixteen million men can trace their ancestry to him.² Whether or not those estimates are even roughly accurate, however, such cases are highly exceptional and focus on numbers and growth rather than on the impact of polygyny on the organization of that society considered more broadly.

Polygyny as practiced by the Aztecs had a significant demographic effect on the organization of their society. Since typically only the nobility were polygynous, especially the upper nobility, and the commoners were monogamous, the overall effect of polygyny on society depended, among other things, on the size of that elite.

Classes have dominated social analyses of Aztec society, but most of these analyses have focused on classes as already formed and described, as though a snapshot of social life in Tenochtitlan in 1519, when the Spaniards first arrived, would be an enduring portrait of Aztec society. But since the

Aztecs often used status terms in describing people, and these may not overlap precisely with the more economic and political terms of class, analyzing Aztec society in terms of the latter may not always be useful—even though I also tend to employ these terms—as the very nature of class in Aztec society is itself under some reconsideration here. Instead, Aztec society was somewhat fluid, although status differences were very real, as exemplified by the sumptuary laws, and nobles constantly shed crocodile tears over their difficulties in adhering to the higher standards to which they claim they were held. These status differences clearly indicated some social distinctions, but how they translated into classes and, especially, into numbers, even relative ones, is far less clear. Unfortunately, we have no actual figures for each class in pre-Columbian Aztec society, although overall numbers point to some approximate ratios.

At Spanish contact, Tenochtitlan itself is estimated to have had at least 200,000 and perhaps as many as 300,000 inhabitants; the estimated range for the highly urbanized Valley of Mexico as a whole is from 1.2 to 2.65 million; and central Mexico as a whole is estimated at 13.0 to 25.2 million.³ How many of these inhabitants fell within each class is far from certain.

The few available population estimates for classes in archaic societies rest on comparisons with preindustrial urban societies elsewhere or are based on theoretical predispositions of the authors in terms of how they see the nature and role of classes.⁴ For example, Gideon Sjoberg estimates the upper classes in preindustrial societies at 5 to 10 percent of the total population, whereas Patricia Crone puts it at less than 2 percent, with 10 percent of the population generally not being engaged in food production and the peasantry comprising 80 to 90 percent of the total.⁵ Rather confusingly, however, she acknowledges that in England in 1300, 15 percent of the population was freed from food production, a figure that rose to 20 percent by 1500, as it did for Japan at that time, which suggests a needed adjustment of her initial estimate. Moreover, these figures are based on the Old World and are predicated on the relatively low productivity of agriculture, which may not apply—at least not so stringently—to the New World and its exceptionally rich cultigens.

Drawing on these estimates, Frederic Hicks argues that while Aztec society falls into noble and non-noble categories in terms of class defined not by birth status (as is nobility) but by proximity to power, the upper class amounted to no more than 1 to 2 percent of the total population and

the middle class comprised 12 to 18 percent of the whole.⁶ This would leave 80 to 87 percent of the population in the lower class. If Tenochtitlan had 200,000 people, then Hicks's estimates would indicate an upper class of some 2,000 to 4,000 people, a middle class of some 24,000 to 36,000 people, and a lower class of some 160,000 to 174,000 people. However, these estimates and the numerical calculations derived from them apply to city-states generally. By contrast, an imperial capital can sustain a much larger upper class, as Hicks acknowledges, because the influx of goods is drawn from a greater area than in the case of a normal city-state. That is, in an imperial situation, whatever surplus would normally be needed to sustain a member of the upper class in a typical city would be drained off by the imperial capital to support its own elite. The result is a much larger upper class in Tenochtitlan than would be sustainable in an ordinary city-state. An idea of how large can be drawn from population estimates of the upper class for central Mexico as a whole.

The previously given population estimates tell us that at 1 percent of central Mexico as a whole, the upper class would number 130,000 to 252,000 members, at 2 percent 260,000 to 504,000, and at 10 percent 1.3 to 2.52 million. As roughly half the population of central Mexico is estimated to have fallen within the Aztec empire, the size of the upper class that could have been supported ranges from a low of 65,000 to a high of 1.26 million people. How much of that population would cluster in Tenochtitlan is necessarily uncertain, but if a conservative 10 percent of the total upper class sustainable within the confines of the Aztec empire was effectively displaced to the capital, an additional 6,500 to 126,000 could be supported there by draining wealth from the outlying city-states. Adding these figures to the 1 to 10 percent upper class estimate of 2,000 to 20,000 individuals (using the 200,000 population estimate), there would be a minimum of 8,500 and a maximum of 14,600 elites out of 200,000 residents or a low of 4.25 percent (at 1 percent) and a high of 73 percent (at 10 percent). Even at the lowest estimated figure for the upper class, a modest 10 percent extraction from the empire would more than quadruple the upper class in Tenochtitlan, with a presumed multiplier effect on the middle class, and even a 2 percent estimate would yield an upper class in a Tenochtitlan of 200,000 individuals of 6.7 percent (at the low central Mexican population estimate) to 14.6 percent (at the high central Mexican population estimate), far outstripping the proportions in independent cities. But if only 10 percent of the

population could be supported as elites, anything that caused the number of nobles to increase more rapidly than the number of commoners needed to support them would be a significant problem for the society.

At first glance it would seem obvious that since Aztec nobles were polygynous and commoners were monogamous, Aztec elites probably increased their numbers faster than did commoners. Once again, Nezahualpilli's exceptionally large family of over two thousand wives and concubines is an instructive example. Moreover, the increased reproductive rate among male nobles was not restricted to formal wives. Concubines also produced children, and this method of reproduction was apparently available even to lower nobles whose marital appeal may have been limited in the highly competitive marriage market.

In Aztec society, the information recorded by Spanish priests that specifically addresses concubines is often at odds with what is known from other sources about various cultural practices. Clearly, Aztec kings had concubines, as did other nobles, but Sahagún disparaged the practice.⁷ Yet once a woman gave birth to a son, her partner had to marry her formally or send her back to her parents. So while concubinage was not marriage among the Aztecs, neither was it a scorned and disreputable practice. Rather, concubinage was an accepted status with formal rights and obligations on the parts of both the man and the woman. But was this a general social practice available to all classes in Aztec society?

Pedro Carrasco argues that concubinage was largely restricted to noblemen, given the great emphasis laid on female virginity in commoner marriages.⁸ But a commoner woman could acceptably become the concubine of a nobleman because the prospect of potential marriage to a noble made it worth the risk of contravening the cultural expectation that one should remain a virgin to secure a good marriage to a commoner.

On the other hand, commoner youths were allowed to have paramours, even though as commoners they would be married to only one woman.⁹ But who these paramours were is unclear. They were probably not formal concubines, as those types of unions required financial support and cohabitation, nor is it likely that they were prostitutes. So the vaunted virgin status of unmarried commoner girls, while likely a parental goal if not a general cultural ideal, may have been significantly overstated by the Spanish priests who described and decried it.

Whatever the sexual outlets available to commoners, the logically

expected greater reproduction of polygynous nobles is borne out by the few examples available. For instance, King Nezahualpilli sired 144 children, an extremely large family and sociobiologically quite satisfactory, since as a powerful man he succeeded in passing on his genes to a large number of offspring.¹⁰ But this perspective is problematic in relation to the mechanics of reproduction more broadly.

Reproduction in polygynous families is not a straightforward calculation, as in x wives produce y children because, at a minimum, not all wives in polygynous unions are treated equally. Moreover, the focus on reproductive rates for polygynously married men obscures the rates for polygynously married women.

While it has been argued that if wifely status is determined by the number of offspring produced, it will not decline with additional marriages; if status is determined by marriage order, however, it will.¹¹ But in fact, reproductive rates for polygynous wives vary not only by wife order but also by husband's age.¹² First wives typically produce more children than second wives in polygynous unions and so on per added wife.¹³ A barren first wife reduces the per capita reproduction rate of polygynous wives. But even if the first wife is fertile, the mere addition of a second wife nevertheless reduces the number of children subsequently born to the first wife, and first wives cease bearing earlier than subsequent wives.¹⁴ In some cases, the fertility of the first polygynously married woman is higher than that of monogamously married women, but fertility rates fall on a per-wife basis in polygynous families such that overall, monogamous wives produce more children per woman.¹⁵ For example, in one study of 3,335 wives of polygynists among nineteenth-century Mormons in the United States, women averaged 5.9 children each whereas an equal number of monogamists from the same group averaged 8 children. Among the Shipibo of Peru, polygynously married women had 1.3 fewer children per reproductive span than did monogamously married women, and the percentage of living children for the latter was higher, too: 70.9 versus 63.2 percent. African data indicate that the fertility rate of monogamous women is one-third higher than of polygynous women.¹⁶

Different cultural practices and values often account for variations in family sizes. But most of the reason for the difference in fertility rates between polygynously married women and monogamous ones is biological and not simply cultural.

First, there is a pronounced difference in rates of sexual intercourse in monogamous marriages compared with polygynous ones. The frequency of coitus is higher for monogamous wives, who receive the exclusive sexual attention of their husbands, than for polygynous wives, who must share it with co-wives.¹⁷ The frequency of coitus is greater for polygynous men than for monogamous ones, but it is more frequent for monogamous women than for polygynous ones.¹⁸ However, divided attention only accounts for part of the lower reproduction among polygynously married women: age differences also play a role. Husbands in such unions tend to be significantly older than their wives, especially their later wives, and with advanced age comes reduced rates of coitus.¹⁹

Second, sexual intercourse with multiple wives exacts a cost. Although the polygynous husband enjoys a greater frequency of coitus, this increased frequency lowers the sperm rate per emission and thus reduces the likelihood of impregnating his partners per attempt.²⁰ Moreover, it slightly skews the normal 1:1 sex ratio of births. In polygynous unions, slightly more girls are born than boys,²¹ which arises from the fact that girls are likelier to be conceived if coitus occurs on or within a day of ovulation, and boys are likelier if coitus occurs at other times.²² This observed consequence of polygynous marriage is presumed to be the result of which partner chooses the time of coitus. When wives select the time, as often occurs in polygynous marriages with multiple wives competing for the sexual attention of one husband, coitus is likeliest to occur during ovulation, when the women experience their maximum libido. As a result, slightly more girls tend to be conceived. But when men choose the time, as is more often the case in monogamous relationships in which the man's sexual attentions are focused exclusively on one woman, coitus is distributed throughout the reproductive cycle, and boys are likelier to be conceived.²³ These biological facts suggest that monogamous societies should produce approximately equal numbers of boys and girls, skewed slightly in favor of the former, while polygynous societies should favor the latter.

Third, reproductive rates are also affected by birth intervals—the longer the time between births, the fewer children a given woman can have—and these durations tend to differ between polygynous and monogamous women. While birth intervals are shorter for first wives than for later ones in polygynous households, on average, monogamous wives have birth intervals four months shorter than polygynous ones.²⁴ When one

polygynous wife is already pregnant or nursing, the husband, in theory, has another wife available.²⁵ But the idea that polygyny guarantees the availability of a sexually receptive wife is not invariably true, especially in societies with long postpartum taboos on sex or in which mothers nurse their children for years, as was the case in Mexico, at least after the Conquest. These circumstances remove women from the sexually receptive pool for extended periods and greatly increase the likelihood that none of a man's polygynous wives will be sexually available to him at any given time.²⁶ Indeed, postpartum taboos on sexual relations are more common, longer, and more ideally observed in polygynous societies than in monogamous ones.²⁷ Whether the Aztecs observed postpartum abstinence in polygynous unions, however, is uncertain.

Fourth, rates of reproduction are also affected by the residence patterns of polygynous wives. Two basic residential patterns occur in polygynous marriages. In one, each wife lives separately, and in the other, all the wives live together (as is often the case in societies that practice sororal polygyny), though in the latter case, co-resident wives sometimes have independent rooms within their husband's house or separate houses within their husband's residential compound.²⁸

In the Aztec case, royal wives and concubines were cloistered together in a palace residence, which was considered a guarantee against infidelity, a practice that was also common in the ancient Middle East.²⁹ But co-wives who live together have lower rates of coitus than do those who live separately.³⁰ This result has little to do with lowered rates of intercourse but rather with patterns of ovulation. When women reside together, their estrous cycles tend to coincide as a result of their sharing female pheromones.³¹ The phenomenon is common today wherever women are housed together, such as in college dorms. In any event, group cycling means that instead of ovulating independently, all of the co-resident women will ovulate at approximately the same time. As a consequence, their fertile periods will also cluster around the same time. Instead of having an opportunity to impregnate one wife or another virtually every day of the month, a polygynous husband is instead likely to have that opportunity only a few days of each month, significantly reducing his fertility. Dispersed residential patterns reduce this clustered fertility period, but despite being biologically effective, keeping wives at a distance from each other is frequently impractical.³²

Polygynous families such as Nezahualpilli's clearly produced more children than monogamous ones, demonstrating that his fertility was greatly increased over that of monogamous husbands. Men, however, are not the bottleneck in reproduction: women are. And while Nezahualpilli produced 144 children (disregarding the usual high preindustrial infant mortality rate to keep the calculations simple) and could be considered "genetically successful," his wives and concubines were not. It is unknown when he acquired each of these women, so numerical totals will have to be used in estimating their fertility. And based on those totals, with over two thousand wives and concubines producing only 144 children, the average number of children per woman was a mere .07, or 1 child for every 14 women.³³

This rate is far below monogamously married women's average and certainly contrary to the Aztec perspective that it was a shame if a woman could not bear children.³⁴ Although Nezahualpilli was individually biologically successful, in terms of society as a whole, he extracted two thousand-plus women from the overall population who, if they had each married monogamously, would likely have produced several children apiece. How many they would have produced is, of course, unknown; nor is the typical number of children born per woman at that time. But if we make a fairly standard estimate of three surviving children per woman in Mesoamerica, Nezahualpilli's monopolization of over two thousand women, although producing 144 children, would mean a net reproductive loss to the society of 5,856 children, with similar though likely less extreme losses for other, presumably smaller, noble polygynous unions. Among those recorded, some kings still had hundreds of wives.

Paradoxically, the lower nobles, who had far fewer wives, would have had a reproduction rate per wife far higher than those of the kings. The reproductive rate per king, however, was nevertheless far higher than that of most other nobles, especially lower nobles.

The greater number of children born into polygynous families compared to monogamous ones greatly increases the polygynous husband's fertility over that of monogamous husbands, but this increase is achieved at the cost of significantly lower fertility of polygynous women compared to monogamous ones. So looking at the number of offspring produced per polygynous husband gives a false sense of reproductive success; in fact, the polygynous relationship results in gross underreproduction by the wives, and polygyny actually slows overall population growth compared to

monogamy. Additionally, the genetic success of the polygynously married male may also be fleeting. The sons he produces may enjoy similar genetic success, but his daughters will inevitably underreproduce, and his overall genetic contribution will likely balance out between his overproducing sons and underproducing daughters.

Since monogamy maximizes female reproductive potential, a polygynous nobility and monogamous commoner class would produce a nobility in which each nobleman has more children than he would have had monogamously but his wives would not. The monogamous commoners, maximizing the reproductive potential of their single wives, would have far fewer children per husband, but far more per wife. The inevitable result of a polygynous nobility and monogamous commoner class is that the latter would grow far faster than the former.

Logically, this proposition is doubtlessly correct. If noblemen married only noblewomen, assuming a basically normal 1:1 male:female sex ratio and no unduly numerous deaths by gender, there would be roughly one woman for each man, so everyone could marry monogamously or some nobles would acquire multiple wives at the expense of others who would then remain unmarried. This imbalance can be ameliorated by two inter-related factors. One, since polygynous men are generally older, they tend to die well before their wives. So, two, these women are freed for remarriage to other men as they grow older. As a result, some men may have multiple wives, but they tend to do so later in life, and once widowed, these women then remarry, so other men have the sequential opportunity to marry polygynously as well.

Women tend to marry men who are older than themselves and that age difference between husbands and wives is even greater in polygynous societies than in monogamous ones.³⁵ Furthermore, the older the man, the likelier he will have multiple wives in societies that practice polygyny.³⁶ And since men typically die at a younger age than do women, women are more likely than their husbands to be widowed, barring death associated with childbearing. Although widows are common in most societies, the exaggerated age difference in polygynous unions results in many more widows in polygynous societies than in monogamous ones.³⁷ Thus, far more women are freed for potential remarriage in polygynous societies than in monogamous ones—women who have become widows while relatively young and still desirable as spouses. And while such a system, including

female remarriage, might be maintained with modest rates of polygyny, the fundamental mathematical reality is that it cannot be maintained if classes form a barrier to intermarriage. There were simply too few noblewomen to sustain universal polygyny among the nobles of Tenochtitlan.

Demographically, divorce may function in largely the same way as widowhood, freeing previously monopolized women who may then be eligible for remarriage. Divorce is generally easy in polygynous societies, and polygynously married individuals divorce at higher rates than monogamously married members of even the same society.³⁸ In polygynous societies, however, divorce often occurs after women pass their childbearing years, when they are replaced with younger, fertile wives, so divorced women in these societies would play little or no part in remarriage if reproduction were the primary goal.³⁹

The Aztecs did allow divorce, but how it might have differed by class is unclear since the recorded instances are typically presented without note of social distinctions. It does appear, however, that divorce laws served both monogamous men's and women's needs equally. Polygynous marriages, by contrast, freed the husband to acquire other wives and so minimized the husband's need for divorce, but if divorce were limited, it could have bound wives to unsatisfactory marriages.

If the Aztec noble marriage pattern was not confined to Tenochtitlan, other possibilities also emerge whereby the demand for additional women might be satisfied. Instead of seeking multiple wives among the nobility of Tenochtitlan alone, noblemen could have sought noblewomen from other cities throughout the empire as potential mates. This plentiful source would easily have supplied enough women for the noblemen of Tenochtitlan, disregarding the social consequences for the donor societies. However, such was not the case.

CHAPTER 6

Polygyny and Social Mobility

ALFONSO CASO ARGUED that Aztec nobles were considered to be such by divine right and that commoners were by descent.¹ Yet further consideration of the implications of polygyny suggests that this was not the case, or at least not rigidly so.

As a practical matter, siphoning off all of the noblewomen from subordinate cities to meet the demand for wives in Tenochtitlan was not feasible. The problem was not the fate of the local noblemen in towns from which noblewomen were taken; the difficulty stemmed from the sustainable ratio of commoners to nobles. Although it remains uncertain how many nobles lived in Tenochtitlan relative to commoners, even with a large and improbable 10 percent nobility, there would still be nine commoners to support each noble. In many ways, that support need not have been direct or local, as much of the wealth that supported the imperially expanded nobility came from outside of the Valley of Mexico. But even the nobles had to eat, and the food that supplied the capital was produced locally and had to be. The limitations of food transport by canoe within the valley and foot portage elsewhere meant that there was a very real, and relatively short, distance from the city within which food could be produced and imported before the shipping costs exceeded the sustainable market price or, in this case, before the bearer ate most or all of the food he was carrying.²

Production of bulk foodstuffs was necessarily local and thus the local ratio of commoners to nobles had to be sustainable. The absolute number of nobles in a city can be increased somewhat, but not infinitely. So while there were more than enough noblewomen throughout the empire to

supply the reasonable needs of the would-be polygynous noblemen of Tenochtitlan (disregarding the consequences for the tributary noblemen), bringing in enough noblewomen to supply the demand in the capital would quickly expand the noble class to numbers far greater than the local commoners could feed. For instance, if the nobility initially comprised only 1 percent of the population in Tenochtitlan, and each nobleman sought only four wives, in that one generation (of, say, twenty years), the nobles would swell to almost 5 percent of the population. If each husband had only one child per wife, a repeat of this pattern in the next generation would produce a noble population of as much as 12.5 percent and in the following generation, over 31 percent. That rate of growth is unsustainable. But at least in the early phases of the Aztec empire, a growing noble class would probably not have been a problem.

For the purposes of this study, the ratio of nobles to commoners cannot be calculated on an empire-wide basis; rather, the calculations must be based locally, in terms of local nobles to local commoners. Even if a short-term solution for the shortage of noblewoman were sought through the importation of additional noblewomen, in the long run, elite polygyny would still be largely unsustainable, provided the Aztecs were class endogamous.

The lower elite fertility rates arising from noble polygyny would have reduced their numbers over time if they were class endogamous. Such a shrinkage might have enriched individual nobles even without further imperial expansion as the tribute wealth would then be shared among fewer of them, but with smaller numbers to hold all of the necessary offices of state, this reduction would also likely have weakened them politically. Instead, the Aztecs adopted another strategy to increase their numbers, which was implemented by Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina: marrying commoners as well as nobles and legitimizing their offspring.

The Aztecs were thus clearly not class endogamous, nor would one expect them to be if the monopolization of noblewomen by the upper nobles meant that many of the lower nobles would have to remain celibate at the same time that all of the commoner men engaged in normal marital and sexual lives with the equal number of available commoner women. Indeed, if elite polygyny were to be a widespread practice, it would virtually force the abandonment of class endogamy. As a consequence, the upper social classes were open to commoners, at least to women, and by marrying

into the noble ranks, commoner women could achieve a higher status than that bestowed on them at birth.

Thus far, our focus has been primarily on the Aztec nobility, among whom the practice of polygyny was concentrated. But the consequences of polygyny were also felt throughout the commoner class as well. Since the nobles were polygynous, while the number of Aztec noblewomen was roughly equal to the number of Aztec noblemen, it is mathematically apparent and substantiated by the historical accounts that Aztec nobles did marry commoner women. And this was not an unusual event; since polygyny was widespread, if not universal, among the nobles, as a class they must have married commoners in far greater numbers than they wed noblewomen.



Three avenues of upward social mobility in Aztec society have been recorded and widely accepted in the literature: the priesthood, trade, and war.³ Those who chose to become priests, or who were dedicated to a particular temple by their parents, were trained in the elite schools (*calmecac*) otherwise reserved for the sons of nobles.⁴ After a successful career as a priest, some were appointed to high governmental positions.⁵ Another route up the social ladder was through trade, and while some may have moved into the lower reaches of the trade, being a merchant (*pochteca*) was largely monopolized by certain wards and was not open to others. But a successful career as a merchant could nevertheless result in considerable wealth and social importance.⁶ While being a priest or merchant could lead to higher social status, these professions did not actually lead to a recognized higher social class. But, as noted previously, being a successful warrior could.

Although elites might seek to root their status in some divine imperative or ancient condition, they are always in a state of slow and continuous transformation, depending on how easily wealth can be accumulated.⁷ As one elite ascends, another descends.⁸ But such a dynamic, while theoretically expected, is wholly unreflected in both the Aztec data and secondary assessments of it, barring the three avenues already noted. Various aspects of Aztec social practices—and especially marriage patterns—suggest that these avenues were not the only ones available, nor do they account for even

the majority of such cases. Rather, assessing the available social data critically and in light of current demographic and social understanding yields a fuller picture and a different understanding of the Aztec dynamic.

All three of the traditional avenues of upward mobility in Aztec society were open only to men, and the numbers of those who actually benefited from them must have been relatively low. What has been generally ignored, however, is that the single greatest avenue of upward social mobility in Aztec society was one that was *not* generally open to men. By marrying nobles, commoner women may or may not have achieved a higher class themselves, but their offspring did. As a consequence, Aztec society was not rigidly class based; its classes were relatively open, with some upward mobility available to men through trade, priesthood, or war, but far more available to women, albeit usually intergenerationally. Whatever the beneficial effects of this explosive expansion of the noble class, further consideration reveals a negative effect as well, at least as far as the lower nobles were concerned.

A polygynous elite that is not class endogamous will expand in numbers and as a percentage of the overall population, but at same time, the ability of the commoner class to sustain this elite is limited and the commoner class will shrink in relation to the nobles if a significant number of commoner women are removed through noble intermarriage without being replaced. And if an expanding elite class exceeds the ability of the commoners to support it, there must be some mechanism for controlling the unsustainable growth of the elite class. In short, a growing nobility coupled with a stable or shrinking commoner base means that the downward mobility of some of the nobles is not unexpected—except to the individuals experiencing it—but is an inherent part of the social system in which peripheral members are shed in order to maintain the core elite at a sustainable level.

Just as elite polygyny fostered upward social mobility of some commoners into the ranks of nobles, if not directly then through their offspring, it just as certainly forced downward mobility on some nobles. Aztec resources were expanding through conquest, but they were nevertheless finite, and if the elite segment of the population grew faster than the rest, whether by greater reproduction or social incorporation, this new total would be too great to be sustained. Some members of the existing elites would necessarily have to be shed in order to sustain the rest.⁹ How, then, did one lose noble status that was based on birthright?

In Aztec society, control of most property by nobles and, indeed, one's noble status all depended upon close political and kin ties to the king. Control of property depended upon becoming a lord, either by inheritance with the king's blessing or by being directly so named by the king, and from this status came lords' lands held by that office in usufruct. So while the lord and his dependants benefited from the production of these lands, their ownership and hence their ultimate disposition remained dependent on the king, at least in theory. But then, so did noble status, though it was more predictably stable.

Nobility among the Aztecs depended upon kinship, though not necessarily lineal kinship, nor kinship as systemically determined as English noble titles, which traditionally are bestowed on the eldest son through primogeniture. Nobility ultimately depended upon one's kin relation to the king. But inherent in this system was the shedding of excess nobles when they were too distantly related to the reigning king, and how far one was from the king could change drastically on the ascension of a new king to whom one was only more distantly related.

How quickly this system operated on any given lower noble is unclear. Although any lower noble's primary kin tie was to their lord, they were all differentially related to the king, depending on their parents' relations. If a new king came to power, therefore, these lower nobles would almost certainly have a slightly different set of kin ties to the new king, even if he were in the same greater cohort as the previous ruler, and far more so if he represented a new cohort. For example, a lower noble who was the son of the king's daughter's brother-in-law would still be related to the next king if the next king were the first king's brother, but rather than being the brother-in-law of the king's daughter, the lower nobleman would merely be the brother-in-law of the new king's niece and be much more distantly related to the king in a crowded field of claimants for royal favor. How closely related a noble was to the king could change quickly on the accession of a new king or the death of any pivotal person in the line of ties connecting him to the king. This was especially true for the lower nobles, who were already more distantly related to the king and possessed fewer kin ties. A new successor, or the death of a crucial kin link, would have immense significance to lower nobles who were already in danger of declining in social status.

Ultimately, the nobles who failed in the competition to find politically advantageous mates who might tie them more closely back into the royal

kin network dropped out of the ranks of the nobility and were no longer supported by the lords' houses, as each of these also had finite resources. As a general rule, nobility appears to have extended out from the king by about three links of kin ties, by either blood or marriage, before those persons became too distant and too unimportant and therefore dropped in status.¹⁰ An analogous though more formalized system prevailed among the Qing nobility of China in which a son inherited a title one rank below that of his father.¹¹

Sumptuary laws that publicly proclaimed royal and noble status restricted the wearing of various garbs by class, suggesting that those not entitled to noble status were deprived of its outward signs, though they may have continued to claim noble descent, much like members of the impoverished *hidalgo* class of Spain.¹² But wearing class markers to which one was not entitled was a criminal offense and not merely a violation of etiquette or social convention. After all, many of the status markers were also quite costly and beyond the financial ability of most people to acquire lawfully. Class and wealth were not always synonymous in Aztec society, however—wealth variations existed among the commoners, as evidenced by the great differences in landholdings, and merchants could accumulate considerable wealth.¹³ But since class was dictated by kin ties to the king, sumptuary laws served to distinguish members of the elite classes from all others, regardless of wealth. Nevertheless, since classes differed based on their members' kin distance from the king and the marital status of their parents, these groupings were somewhat flexible, with some people rising and, more significantly, others falling. One of the primary purposes of sumptuary laws, therefore, was to make these shifts explicit, to keep downwardly mobile former nobles from continuing to cling to the outer trappings of nobility to which they were no longer officially entitled, regardless of any pretensions they may have had. Thus, while sumptuary laws are generally presumed to be aimed at barring lower classes from claiming higher status by virtue of their attire—and they did serve that purpose—they were equally aimed at denying the pretensions of downwardly mobile nobles to their ancestral standing.

What, then, happened to a descending noble in Aztec society? With royal dispensation, one could become a merchant, so some reduced nobles may have joined that group or become artisans or scribes as befit their superior educations, as none of these occupations required realty, or they may

have become overseers on lords' estates.¹⁴ The calpollis had no apparent means of absorbing declining nobles since all of their realty was held corporately and rights to it were determined patrilineally. But the presence of noble land amid calpolli lands in the early colonial period suggests that the declining nobles may have joined calpollis, provided they brought property with them (though one would expect them to have claimed nobility to the Spaniards, whose understanding of it was based on descent alone).¹⁵ While they may have claimed ownership thereafter, their lack of recognition as nobles coupled with being treated as calpolli members probably resulted in these properties being absorbed into the rest of the calpolli lands. Moreover, attracting and supporting multiple spouses became increasingly difficult for a declining noble. Not only did the inability to maintain a polygynous household drastically decrease the number of one's political ties and thus weaken the former noble; it was a public display of his new non-noble status.

Aztec social status was thus not absolutely fixed at birth. One's genealogical distance from the king may have been biologically fixed, but if the next king came from a line more distant from one's own, one's prospects, if not formal status, declined markedly. So what was the mechanism by which one maintained nobility? Becoming too distantly related to the king was disastrous and meant a decline in power and social standing, yet altering descent was beyond anyone's control. The fact of one's kin ties may have been immutable, but their significance could be shifted in one of two ways.

First, with the election of a new king or the appointment of a new lord, a noble could to some extent rearrange existing kin ties to emphasize those with more advantageous links and deemphasize others that were now less useful. And among the upper nobles with many wives, these kin ties could be numerous. People who had not been as closely linked to the old power holder might now be closer to the new, and their stock would rise accordingly. But one could not always do much to influence who attained office, especially since each candidate had his own cadre of kin backers.

Second, kin ties could be altered through marriage. The best prospects in this regard were upper noblewomen since they were already closely related to powerful people and marrying such a woman secured nearly the same relationship for the husband. But few such women were available, and competition for them must have been keen, not only because they were important but because there were as many upper noblemen as noblewomen,

yet each man could marry far more than one woman, and the higher his status, the more women he was likely to marry and be able to support. The chances of a man of lesser status somehow managing to secure an upper noblewoman in marriage—against far more desirable competitors and in light of the disadvantages to the woman of marrying down—were slim, although it occasionally happened.¹⁶

Because upper nobles married more than one woman, it is not only probable but a virtual certainty that they would have wives of various statuses: upper noble, lower noble, and also commoner. Lower noblemen would be very unlikely to secure an upper noble wife and fortunate to find even a lower noble one in the face of this competition. Far more likely, all or most of their wives would be commoners. Most commoners, however, would have little prospect of marrying above their class at all. What this then meant was that the offspring of virtually any nobleman would vary in status: upper noblemen and upper noblewomen would produce upper-noble children with significant kin ties through both the patriline and matriline; upper noblemen and lower noblewomen would have less status, with significant kin ties only through the patriline though perhaps some through their weaker matriline, and their children would perhaps be considered lower nobles; and upper noblemen and commoner women would likely produce still lower-status offspring who had significant kin ties only through their patriline. In the latter two cases, the offspring would either be lower nobles or, at best, less important upper nobles whose marriage prospects were dimmer and whose children were likely destined to drop in status as a result.

The members of each polygynous family could thus vary significantly in their status and prospects. Some would decline; others would maintain position; and a fortunate few might actually rise. This last prospect must have given hope to an ascending noble's half brothers, as a half brother's rise meant the rise of all through that kin relation, even if to a lesser degree. Precisely how quickly one dropped in status is uncertain and probably varied since kin ties were themselves so variable. The sons of lords who did not succeed to their fathers' positions became or remained lower nobles.¹⁷ And this decline may well explain why the sons of some nobles attended the elite *calmecac* while others attended the more plebian *telpochcalli*.¹⁸ Then, as now, where you went to school spoke volumes about your social standing.

In short, a relatively open system of royal succession in which multiple potential candidates competed for the throne coupled with polygynous marriage practices had a massive impact on Aztec society generally. The expansion of polygyny among the upper nobles necessarily fostered class exogamy, producing a society in which commoner women could ascend in rank, at least through their children, on a scale that dwarfed the social possibilities available to commoner men. At the same time, the burgeoning noble classes forced many lower nobles out of that class, dropping them to commoner status in a sort of social churning that was the inevitable result of noble polygyny.



Polygynously driven class exogamy began at least by the reign of Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina and continued thereafter with minor changes introduced by Tizoc. A half century later, Moteuczoma Xocoyotl made additional changes in the system, but these were implemented too shortly before the Spanish conquest to assess their long-term consequences. Whatever benefits he foresaw in them for himself, they do not appear to have been beneficial for the society as a whole. By disavowing nobility for the children of nobles by commoner spouses, Moteuczoma Xocoyotl was effectively imposing class endogamy on the Aztec noble polygynous system, at least for all such unions thereafter, if they were to be considered “legitimate.” To his own benefit, these reforms would help keep the throne in Moteuczoma Xocoyotl’s lineage, as now only those men most closely related to him would be able to wed the most desirable mates among the upper nobility, and, having wed multiple noblewomen, they would produce the offspring necessary for a king to maintain his political ties with subordinate rulers. The practical effect of this change would be to eliminate competitors from more distant lineages who would not be able to acquire as many noble wives. And regardless of the qualities of the noble offspring they did sire, the fact that these offspring would possess far fewer noble connections cemented through elite intermarriage would drastically lessen the likelihood that they or their kin would reach high office. In fact, all nobles but those most closely connected to the king would have been forced into noble monogamy, or they would have married commoners and thus doomed their progeny to a rapid decline into the commoner class. Rather than

downward mobility being three kin links distant from the king, the drop would now be a single precipitous step from any noble who married unwisely.



The movements of commoners upward and of nobles downward were not independent phenomena, but neither did the shedding of offspring from the lower ranks of the nobility favor the commoners by vacating positions the latter could then fill. The lesser offspring (typically sons) of nobles were pushed out precisely because they could not be supported. Nevertheless, their fall was not complete, as among the commoners: they still had better connections and perhaps better educations.

How large the upward stream of commoners was is uncertain. A large number of male commoners cannot have been tolerated in the noble ranks, no matter how skilled in battle they might have been, as they would have competed directly with hereditary nobles and their extended kin networks. But the very mechanism of elite polygyny made the upward movement of commoner women a frequent occurrence, at least until the reversal of social policy by Moteuczoma Xocoyotl. But rather than the result of a conscious or egalitarian policy, this female mobility was the consequence of hereditary noble prerogatives and excess.

This pattern of noble polygyny encouraged both the upward social mobility of commoner women and the downward social mobility of noblemen who could not secure wives of sufficient rank that their status and kin ties could buoy up the family for another generation and instead married mostly commoners. And because the social fate of the offspring was determined by the parent who had lower status, typically the wife, and because a husband had multiple wives, offspring could be split in status according to their various mothers, leading to internal social antagonisms.

Elite polygyny thus creates a sexual asymmetry in downward mobility. This onerous fate falls only on the men, who are too numerous to be supported, rather than on the women, who are not numerous enough to supply the nobles' need for high-status wives and are therefore likely to secure noble husbands.

The same fate likely awaited the newly enfranchised meritocratic nobles. Despite being elevated to noble status, which was nominally hereditary,

their sons also needed to marry well, but the newly ennobled almost surely lacked the requisite kin connections and social skills, other than the martial, and would thus be less desirable mates for noblewomen. Possessing little to offer a noblewoman who had multiple marital options and having no noble connections by birth, these meritocratic nobles would most likely marry commoners, and their offspring, though entitled to be nobles, would inevitably drop in status, perhaps not in a single generation but soon.

Two factors helped mute both the rise of commoner women and the fall of noble men. The first factor was the high rate of infant mortality in pre-industrial societies generally. The second factor was the late age at which Aztecs married. More education for nobles and commoners alike in Aztec society meant that young men were not tied to family responsibilities for as many years. In contrast to other city-states, Aztec youths were unfettered by familial obligations and could engage in offensive warfare. Elsewhere, large numbers of men were available locally for defensive purposes, and they assumed familial obligations relatively early in their lives. But the main impact of lengthier educations and military obligations was the deferral of marriage in Tenochtitlan until significantly later than was the practice elsewhere.¹⁹ As a result, these men's opportunity to reproduce was constricted, yielding a lower lifetime fertility rate than elsewhere and easing the competitive pressures brought about by elite hyperpolygyny. The direct economic cost of deferring adulthood by keeping youths in school longer—preventing their marriages and the establishment of their own households—was that they did not become tributaries until later in life. Yet this was the practice in Tenochtitlan, so the benefits to the state of training them and employing them more effectively in war were presumably greater than the income lost in deferred tribute.



In addition to the consequences for the respective classes, noble polygyny had an impact on the population as a whole. Polygyny inherently creates a gender imbalance because a few men monopolize many women, causing a wife shortage among the remaining men. Some of this imbalance can be evened out by social practices, notably by male celibacy in early manhood, the fact that females marry at far younger ages than males, and greater male mortality from warfare.²⁰ But such factors do not fully compensate for

hyperpolygyny, such as that practiced among the Aztec upper nobility, and a gender imbalance will result and will be especially pronounced locally. Given the lower rates of female reproduction that accompany polygyny, one would expect a slow, or even negative, rate of growth for Tenochtitlan.

It is difficult to quantify Tenochtitlan's growth with any precision in the absence of reliable numbers for the pre-Columbian era. But from its founding in 1325 until the arrival of Cortés in 1519, Tenochtitlan expanded from a population of no more than a few thousand people to at least two hundred thousand.²¹ Contrary to expectations and the demographic patterns of polygyny, such population growth in just under two hundred years means that the population almost doubled every twenty years (once every generation) for almost ten generations—a phenomenal growth rate and one that greatly outstripped that of the other cities in the Valley of Mexico.

It is highly unlikely that such population growth could be accounted for by internal reproduction alone. Yet if fertility does not explain the growth of Tenochtitlan's population and longevity is unlikely to have been extended significantly, migration is the sole remaining demographic factor that must have accounted for much of the enormous increase. In fact, outsiders did move into Tenochtitlan to swell its numbers, although the historical accounts primarily record the influx of more socially valued persons, primarily artisans, including jewel workers from Xochimilco and goldsmiths from the Mixtec region. But artisans alone cannot account for such a large increase in Tenochtitlan's population. Indeed, the Aztec social system, which defined calpolli membership in terms of patrilineal descent, effectively excluded migrants from the land-based occupations that made up most of the labor force of the city.

The pattern of polygynous marriage by the nobility coupled with the consequent extraction of commoner women to meet this demand created an inevitable shortage of potential wives for commoner men. And it was this shortage that fueled the influx of additional people into Tenochtitlan. The largest movement was not of whole populations from outside, as there were few ways in which whole families or even single men could be absorbed into the Aztec calpolli system. Since men had access to calpolli land by virtue of their patrilines, membership depended on being born into the ward. But the women who married calpolli men were typically outsiders—to the family if not to that calpolli—and foreign women could marry Aztec commoners and enter the calpolli system just like any other bride,

and it was these women who comprised the bulk of migrants into Tenochtitlan. The simple fact that women could be absorbed into the Aztec calpolli system does not account for why they would move into Tenochtitlan from elsewhere, however.

Migration generally involves both push and pull factors. That is, one typically has reasons to leave one's point of origin as well as reasons to go to one's destination. The pull in the Aztec case can be explained by the attractions of Tenochtitlan, which was the largest, most powerful, and wealthiest city in the New World and thus provided more opportunities, especially for women migrating from rural areas. Marriageable women were also in short supply among the commoners of Tenochtitlan. And furthermore, the opportunities for upward social mobility were greater, if not for the migrant women, then perhaps for their future children. But what of the push factors? These, I believe, can be explained in terms of the larger changes in the Valley of Mexico.

With the rise of Tenochtitlan as an imperial capital and the concomitant increase in population, the demand for agricultural goods also grew, exacerbated by the city's island location and general land shortage. And while the Aztec economy was based, at least in part, on the influx of tribute as well as foreign trade, the high cost of foot transport and the low cost of foodstuffs, which were nevertheless quite bulky in relation to the cost, limited the distance from which the latter could be imported. Only nearby areas could effectively feed the capital, and the Aztecs undermined the local production of many finished products by funneling tribute and trade goods into the markets, probably at lower prices than local producers could match. The effect was to undercut local manufacturing of such goods and encourage increased agricultural production instead, as distant foodstuffs could not reach Tenochtitlan's markets under the prevailing transport system.²² While this increase in primary production and decline in secondary production in the surrounding cities served Tenochtitlan well, it caused social disruptions locally.

The tasks that were minimized by this regional economic reorganization were often cottage industries primarily pursued by women, such as weaving, while those that were now advantaged, in agriculture, were overwhelmingly performed by men, with the result that women's value and status declined in the surrounding towns and cities. Though they were still sought after as wives, the decline in their status and the decreased demand

for women's nondomestic labor effectively freed them to migrate into Tenochtitlan, where women were in demand as wives and where their economic prospects were better. Migration from one town with an undersupplied marriage market to another suffering the same, or perhaps even worse, condition, did not solve the problem of securing enough women within the region, however. The most advantaged women doubtless remained in their home cities, but those with fewest opportunities—more rural women than urban—probably made the move, as commonly happens elsewhere.²³ And although drawing on women from outside Tenochtitlan did not entirely solve the problem, it did spread out the imbalance, distributing the shortage throughout the region.

So the shortage of women in Tenochtitlan that was created by the polygynous nobles marrying exogamously simultaneously created a considerable demand for more women among the city's commoners. This demand dovetailed nicely with the social constraints on calpolli membership that prevented the influx of most commoner men, who now had enhanced agrarian opportunities at home, but allowed the incorporation of outside women through marriage. And Tenochtitlan's voracious demand for nearby agricultural products shifted the overall economic makeup of the Valley of Mexico from a series of economically semiautonomous cities with their own dependent hinterlands into an at least partially integrated valley-wide economy that emphasized agrarian activities and minimized local craft production. Local men were in even greater demand in agriculture, but the labor of women was minimized, creating a social climate that fostered female migration from peripheral cities precisely at a time when Tenochtitlan most needed women and could absorb them within the social strictures of its society and that fueled the continued upward flow of women into the polygynous elite. This mechanism secured enough women within Tenochtitlan to sustain polygyny among the nobility, and though reproduction was lower per woman, it was higher per man. The nobles had more offspring than did the commoners, yet the increasing imbalance could not be sustained, and the downward mobility of the more distant kin accelerated.

Property, Inheritance, and Class

IN AZTEC SOCIETY, status and class were a series of obligations that, if met, permitted the exercise of certain rights accepted in that society and overseen by the polity. While realty, for example, cannot be “owned” in any existential sense—you cannot eat it, destroy it in any meaningful way, or take it with you when you die—“owning” a property essentially means that the polity will enforce certain rights on your behalf and oppose those of others in relation to that land. Thus, you may build a house on it, provided you conform to the applicable zoning laws, and you may use the land in any of a number of acceptable ways, as long as taxes are paid, and the state will support your doing so. But your rights are not absolute, and you usually cannot, for example, build a garbage dump in your residential neighborhood, use your land as a nuclear weapons test site, or employ it for any number of less extreme purposes. In short, your “ownership” of the land is circumscribed and is only a socially recognized set of rights.

In his classic 1963 article, Alfonso Caso laid out the basic principles of Aztec property (realty). Land could be either public or private. Public lands fell into three broad types: lands belonging to the king, lands belonging to the temples, and lands set aside to support the army. The king’s land, called palace lands (*tecpanatlalli*), belonged to the office of the king rather than individually to its current occupant, and it could be allocated to nobles or meritorious individuals in usufruct or rented to provide for the king (*tlato-camilli*, *tlatocatlalli*, or *itonal*). A second type of public land, called land of the gods (*teotlalli*), belonged to the various temples and associated schools and was worked by their tenants to support their respective institutions. The third type of public land, called shield land (*milchimalli* or *cacalomilli*),

was cultivated by the various tributary towns to support Aztec garrisons and troops.¹

Private land similarly fell into three categories. The king's lands were held privately by the king, were accrued either by inheritance or by appropriation through conquest, and, as private property, could be sold or otherwise alienated. Nobles also held lands privately—called *pillalli*, *teuctlalli*, or *tecpillalli*—which were worked by *mayeque* or *talmaitin* and could also be sold or alienated. And the third type of private land belonged to towns (*altepetlalli*). These lands were held by *calpolli*s as ward lands and worked by their members, who were commoners. Families held this land in usufruct, though such land could reportedly be reallocated if it fell into disuse for two years. Customarily, however, usufruct was passed down within the same family.²

Caso argues that these types of lands reflect the situation immediately before the Spanish conquest. As social conventions, land rights convey power to their possessor and are enforced by society. Furthermore, it is this institutionalization of ownership rights through time and between generations that creates classes.

In Aztec society, commoners could inherit personalty, but they could not inherit realty. Usufruct, however, did pass by inheritance, if not with the certainty of law, then through the preponderance of practice. But apart from being able to sell or otherwise alienate realty, what is the practical difference between lifelong (or entailed) ownership and usufruct? Among the differences are that land, if freehold, can be sold, rented, used to secure debts, and inherited. In effect, ownership is a broader set of rights and obligations than is usufruct, giving the possessor more flexibility and autonomy.

Calpolli lands existed during the pre-imperial era, but it is unclear whether any lands were attached to the crown or to the temples. If they were, they were not extensive. And it is even more unlikely that the early kings possessed their own lands as individuals unless such lands were brought by their noble wives when they married in from other cities.

The situation of the *cuauhpiltin* is little discussed in the historical sources, so any description of their inheritance is necessarily speculative. As commoners, they were likely to inherit the use of their fathers' lands (unless, of course, a *cuauhpilli* had pursued a military career precisely because an elder brother was likelier to inherit). But once elevated to noble status, they

would not work that land nor, in all likelihood, be entitled to share in what was essentially a communal (*calpolli*) resource, as they were no longer functioning members of that community. At the same time, they had been elevated through their own merits and had no noble parents who might bequeath them wealth. The testamentary situation of these men thus was rather precarious, and unless the lords of the *teuccalli* to which they were presumably attached made provisions for them, their future, on a lord's death, could be bleak.³

Although the more elaborated forms of realty described by Caso may have existed in other cities of the Valley of Mexico, only after their rulers became emperors did these elaborate types of realty emerge in Aztec society. Then, as an adjunct to imperial expansion, if not the cause, tribute began flowing into Tenochtitlan, and its allocation was primarily in the hands of the king. The king, in effect, granted to the recipients of lands a bundle of state-enforceable rights, and these ensured the accumulation of wealth. But the creation of classes in Aztec society depended not simply on the granting of realty but on how those rights were transmitted between generations, if in fact they were.

Inheritance systems vary considerably in what may be bequeathed, for how long, and to whom. But the primary distinction drawn in social analysis is between partible and impartible inheritance systems, that is, whether one's estate descends to (typically) one single offspring (impartible) or is divided among more heirs (partible). There are many variations on these two basic systems of inheritance. For instance, in a system that allows an estate to be divided among multiple heirs, that partibility may encompass all offspring or only some, such as sons only or daughters only, and may be for all property or only for personalty. But the primary concern is with inheritance systems that pass estates intact between generations (impartible) versus those that divide them, potentially with each generation (partible).⁴

Impartible inheritance systems ensure that landholdings continue intact within a family or lineage, however they are culturally defined. Among their consequences, however, is the dispossession of all but the single inheriting offspring, although the dispossessed may still be granted personalty. Such a practice effectively guarantees that non-inheriting offspring will either be forced into other livelihoods or be reduced in their circumstances. In contrast, the partible inheritance system allows multiple offspring to inherit, whether all or those of one sex or the other.

Although partible inheritance systems are more equitable, they are so at the cost of maintaining a viable land estate. For example, if a hundred-acre estate is a prosperous landholding under preindustrial conditions, that estate will remain intact through generation after generation in an impartible inheritance system and thus continue to be a viable basis of support for the inheritors. In contrast, that same hundred-acre estate in a partible inheritance system in which the owner has, for example, four sons, will leave each son, if provided for equally, twenty-five acres, all of which remain viable landholdings under preindustrial conditions. But if each son also has four inheriting sons, they will each receive eight and a quarter acres, and their sons' sons will receive just over two acres apiece, and their sons just half an acre. Partibility provides for all inheriting offspring, but in doing so, it makes the original estate incapable of sustaining viable households in a very few generations. The heirs will eventually be forced to quit the land or to acquire more, if possible.

Such a reduced fate was unlikely to befall Aztec commoners, as land was corporately, though unequally, held and inheritance was of usufruct only. Theoretically, the ward heads could redistribute land on the death of a usufruct holder, but in practice they did not. It is unclear, however, if the right of usufruct was partible, but it seems unlikely as usufruct was not owned by a farmer personally. However, *calpolli* lands were expanding through the creation of *chinampas*, so some non-inheriting sons may still have received these in usufruct and continued as farmers. But more likely, non-inheriting sons would go into other occupations despite the general paucity of desirable alternatives, since most were controlled by guilds and were relatively closed to outsiders. Among these alternative professions were the priesthood and the military.

Noble lands were different. While those held privately may or may not have been divided by inheritance, those lands held by the lords (from the king) and the lands held by the office of the king were not. These lands passed from one officeholder to his successor intact, and that person may or may not have been the son of the previous lord. Thus, despite their holding large estates, lords were not guaranteed their own dynasties as they could not be assured that their wealth would descend in their lines. In practice, the more powerful a lord's family, the less likely the king was to remove the estate to someone else. But the effect of the system was to create

a body of lords, each of whom possessed a considerable estate that supported a large, extended group of kin and other dependants. The lords held their estates for life, or at least the powerful ones did, since their removal would also threaten other lords and increase the likelihood that the king would be resisted. So while the king may have wished to replace the various lords, in fact their deaths were probably dispersed over years and the passage of their estates was gradual and not even disrupted by the death of a king, as might have happened had these estates been owned by the king personally and subject to testamentary disposition.

The king was in a similar situation regarding his office lands. These lands did not descend to his direct heirs but to the next king, which ensured that each king not only possessed the *de jure* status of lawful ruler but also exercised the *de facto* power of the office's economic wealth. Yet since this wealth shifted from king to king, the effects on the king's kin of having the wealth pass to someone else to whom they were only more distantly related could be significant, and the struggle to maintain the office within a kin bloc must have been fierce.

The most important right attendant to kinship is inheritance, which involves not only the distribution of property but the rearrangement of family relations.⁵ Although the inheritance of wealth, especially realty, has generally become less important than education in industrial society for determining a person's economic position, in preindustrial societies, where wealth was largely tied to land, it assumed a major role.⁶

General statuses and attendant sumptuary rights are inherited at birth, but others are inchoate and exist only as potentials that must be fulfilled. Many of these rights could be inherited by all of one's offspring, such as noble status. But those that can be used exclusively by one person at a time tend to be inherited at death—realty, personalty, and offices. Inheritance cannot simply be seen as a system of legal rights that is applied to families in a given society. Rather, inheritance is intimately tied to both the marriage and reproduction systems of a society and to its general aims in dispersing or concentrating wealth. Thus, impartible inheritance fosters lineages, while partible inheritance favors the creation of nuclear families.

Goody's argument that polygyny is primarily aimed at ensuring heirs, since only, or at least primarily, the nobles engaged in that type of marriage in Aztec society, suggests that the nobles were more concerned with

inheritance than were the commoners.⁷ Whether true or not, only the nobles divided their realty. As is common in polygynous unions, the father's wealth was divided among the offspring, typically among the sons. The result was to disburse the accumulated wealth of a lifetime among multiple heirs, as, for example, Charlemagne divided his holdings among his many sons by both wives and concubines.⁸

Problems with Polygyny

POLYGYNY AND CONCUBINAGE might seem to have provided ample sexual outlets in Aztec society, at least for noblemen, but there were still others. Among these informal sexual liaisons was prostitution. The precise social status of prostitutes is difficult to determine, however, since the records of them date from the post-Conquest era, in which prostitution, or anything that could be construed as prostitution, was held in low regard by the Spanish clergy, who were responsible for most of the accounts in which they appear.¹

On one hand, the prostitute (*ahuiani*; pl. *ahuianime*) is disparaged in the general historical accounts. Thus, Sahagún records that the prostitute is an evil woman who sells her body.² She is a seductress, but she also dresses herself beautifully, paints her face with rouge, darkens her teeth with cochineal, chews chicle in public, and wears her hair in a distinctive style in which one half hangs loose and the other is wound around the head.

Unmarried women were permitted to chew chicle in public, although married women could only chew it in private. But public chewing was a major indicator of a prostitute, and those who chewed it too much would, it was believed, become evil women. The point of their chewing chicle was to cause their saliva to flow and make their mouths smell sweet.³ Prostitutes were thus described as physically desirable and had the potential to become wealthy.⁴ But at the same time, they were described as socially undesirable, behaving shamelessly by doing such things as using aphrodisiacs (the *pooyo-matli* herb), being vain, selling themselves publicly in the marketplace, walking the streets, and becoming drunk in public.⁵

Women could garner wealth from a life of prostitution. But rather than being a choice, the Aztecs considered a life of prostitution to be astrologically preordained—if a woman was born on the day 1 Xochitl, she would either become a skilled embroiderer or she would become impoverished and become a prostitute, and if she was born on the day 1 Calli, she would be idle and become a prostitute or a slave. Alternatively, a life of prostitution could also be the result of defective personality traits, such as being haughty and dissolute.⁶

But if prostitutes were so universally disparaged and condemned, why, as in modern society, did they seem to be so numerous and how could they become wealthy? Obviously, they were not as condemned in practice as they were in rhetoric, or at least in Spanish priestly rhetoric. In fact, Aztec prostitutes had formal roles in a number of important public ceremonies. For example, during the festival of Tlacaxipehualiztli, the leaders of the *telpochcalli*, the main warriors, and the rulers danced along with the women and the prostitutes; in the dance during the festival of Huei Tecuilhuitl, the military leaders, members of knightly military orders, and nobles came out from the House of Song and between each pair were women, including the prostitutes; in the festival of Tlaxochimaco, the military leaders, warriors, and knights danced to honor Huitzilopochtli and so, too, did the prostitutes; in the festival of Ochpaniztli, in the dance for the goddess Teteo Innan, the women, including prostitutes, danced; and in the festival of Uauhquitemelqualiztli on the tenth day of the month Izcalli, the person who was to be sacrificed in the month of Tlacaxipehualiztli was given a prostitute to watch over him and care for him.⁷

These roles in Aztec ritual life, in which prostitutes associated with the highest and most honored levels of Aztec society, suggest that they were not the morally condemned women depicted in colonial accounts.⁸ While prostitutes may have assumed a range of stations, the more successful ones were closer to the courtesans of early Renaissance European society—not wives, but esteemed and accomplished women with roles that were acknowledged and accepted in indigenous society.



Other forms of extra- or premarital sexual intercourse were also available, but the degree to which they were socially acceptable is unclear. Instead,

what struck at the institution of marriage most directly in Aztec society was adultery. It is generally presumed that women who share their husbands with other wives in a polygynous union will have less frequent sexual intercourse.⁹ It is also claimed—probably correctly—that adultery is more common in polygynous societies than in monogamous ones, with the reasons including the infrequency of sexual relations from the women's point of view, the lack of a continuously available sexual partner, and the large number of unmarried males.¹⁰ Thus, adultery should be significantly more common among Aztec nobles, who were polygynous, than among commoners, who were not.

Whatever concerns adultery provoked in pre-imperial Aztec society, Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina outlawed it early in the history of the empire. His new law provided that adulterers were to be stoned to death and their bodies thrown into the rivers or left for the buzzards.¹¹ However important this law may have been to the broader society, it was even more important among the nobility since polygyny was expanding and, especially among the upper nobility, there was an increasing concern that the offspring of the king's and noblemen's wives be their actual offspring, as it was these offspring who would be their nominal fathers' successors.

Polygynous societies typically engender a certain degree of social tension, as the monopolization of women by a few men inevitably leaves many men without any women, notably the men on the lower rungs of society, and often spurs illicit sexual liaisons between these disenfranchised men and polygynously married but often-neglected wives. To illustrate, if King Nezahualpilli actually had over two thousand wives and concubines and he was always home to have sexual intercourse with one of them every day, each wife or concubine would receive his sexual attention only once every six years on average. But even if he had sexual intercourse as many as six times a day and was never absent from home, as he would be on military campaigns and while attending to the many matters of state, each wife could anticipate no more than annual attention. In practice, such polygynous men typically had favorites who enjoyed far more attention, but at the same time, other wives enjoyed far less, resulting in even more-neglected wives.

In any case, adultery was disparaged in Aztec society and was punishable by death in Tenochtitlan (fig. 3).¹² Elsewhere, the punishment differed. In some cities (e.g., Misantla and Tlacotepec), adulterers were stoned to death;



FIGURE 3. A depiction of the execution of two adulterers, the man by stoning and the woman by strangulation. (Courtesy of the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, Codex Telleriano-Remensis, BNP 386, folio 17r.)

in others (e.g., Oztuma and Ameca), only female adulterers were killed; and in one place (Oztuma), the adulteress was killed even if she was the unmarried party.¹³ In another town (Tetela), adulteresses were punished by having their noses cut—presumably off—whereas in Azcapotzalco, the noses were cut off both parties to the adultery.¹⁴ The Codex Telleriano-Remensis records that both male and female adulterers were stoned to death, although the accompanying depiction shows the man being stoned and the woman being strangled, as does the *Mapa Quinatzin*.¹⁵ But it appears that a double standard flourished, and as much as it was condemned in women, adultery by men was expected.¹⁶

The Aztecs were not alone in exacting such harsh punishments, and the death penalty was applied to adultery in such other polygynous archaic states as ancient Babylonia and Pharaonic Egypt. But in these cases and in Arab Islam, the penalty was aimed primarily at the woman. In Egypt, an

adulterous husband could merely be divorced by his wife. The penalty could be avoided by adulterous women in imperial Rome if they registered as prostitutes.¹⁷

Though differing among the many city-states, prohibitions on adultery were widely observed in central Mexico and were probably quite ancient. Even in the Valley of Mexico, formal laws against it were promulgated prior to the rise of the Aztec empire. For instance, one very early ruler of Tetzaco, Nopaltzin, son of Xolotl, declared that adulterers were to be killed.¹⁸

The most famous case of adultery in pre-Columbian Mexico, and the most widely chronicled, led to King Nezahualpilli's execution of his principal wife, Chalchiuhnenetzin, who was the daughter of King Axayacatl, for adultery, along with her paramour, the ruler of Tezoyocan, who was strangled for trying to seduce one of Nezahualpilli's daughters.¹⁹ This and other lesser examples of the kings punishing nobles for committing adultery were often held up as illustrations of the evenhandedness of the law, applied to commoner and noble alike. Among the various chronicled examples, Moteuczoma Xocoyotl punished a prince named Huitznahuatl Ecamalacatl for adultery by sentencing him to be stoned to death, while King Nezahualpilli had one of his sons, Huexotzincatzin, executed for committing adultery with one of the king's wives, who was also put to death.²⁰ Another king of Tetzaco put four of his sons along with their four wives to death for the same offense, and when a lord of Tlaxcallan committed adultery, he and the women were both put to death.

The consequences and standard of proof for conviction for adultery appear to have varied by circumstances as well as by social class.²¹ If caught in the act, both adulterers were stoned to death, but if the evidence was only circumstantial they were strangled instead. If the adulterers killed the husband of the adulteress, the adulterer was burned alive and the adulteress was strangled, and nobles who were adulterers were also strangled, as were go-betweens in adulterous affairs.²²

All the evidence of adultery in the pre-Columbian world is anecdotal, but there is an indirect indicator of its frequency. Like most socially defined character flaws, a predisposition toward adultery was considered to be at least partially based on birth date. Thus, anyone born during a *trecena* (a thirteen-day period) beginning with the days 1 Cozcacuauhtli, 1 Ecatl, or 1 Cipactli was believed to be destined to commit adultery.²³ Since the

continuously cycling 260-day *tonalpohualli* day count contains twenty trecenas, having three that predisposed those born within them to adultery would suggest a cultural expectation that 15 percent of the people—men and women—would commit adultery. In addition, other circumstances or omens could foretell adultery as well, such as a barn owl entering someone's house.²⁴

Although adultery may have been expected from a disreputable minority, and despite the law against it being framed in terms of a broad prohibition, only a single case of adultery among commoners was recorded. In that instance, Nezahualcoyotl heard the charge of adultery against two old women who pleaded that they still desired sexual relations but that their husbands were impotent—no disposition of the case was recorded.²⁵

This class asymmetry in the punishment of adultery is also evident in descriptions of the execution of justice. Sahagún's description does not mention adultery among commoners. Only in discussing noble justice does Sahagún mention adultery and then discuss it at length.²⁶

This social asymmetry raises the question of whether vastly more nobles than commoners practiced adultery, especially as the latter outnumbered the former by at least twenty to one. It would seem unlikely, even under the social constrictions of elite polygyny. Rather than being an accurate reflection of the exceedingly high incidence of adultery among the nobility, the Aztecs' extreme focus on adultery was a reflection of their concern over the legitimacy of noble births.

Forgiveness, at least in a personal and religious sense, was available for adulterers, and thieves, fornicators, murderers, and others who had broken the laws repented during the festival of Xochiquetl. These people, including adulterers, gathered straws in the same number as their transgressions, went to the temple, pierced their tongues, passed the straws through, and placed them, covered with blood, before the goddess. The priests then gathered everyone's straws and burned them, thereby cleansing those who confessed and pardoning them for their sins, though this practice does not seem to have had any power to absolve wrongdoers before the law.²⁷

But what, really, was adulterous in Aztec society? For monogamous commoners, the standard seems fairly clear—adultery was a married man or a married woman having sexual relations with someone other than their spouses, as well as an unmarried person having sexual relations with a married person. But adultery was primarily recorded among the polygynous

elite, and that is what the laws address. So again, what was adulterous activity?

Having sexual relations with someone not a spouse was clearly adultery in Aztec society, but this principle that seems so evenhanded for the monogamous did not apply to the polygynous.²⁸ While a noble husband was not permitted sexual relations with another man's wife, he was nevertheless free to marry additional wives or to acquire as many concubines as he could afford (whether he could have sexual relations with an unmarried woman is unaddressed in the historical accounts, but given the narrow separation between that and concubinage, it was probably permissible). Male wanderlust thus had several socially acceptable outlets, though in a few places a concubine could be punished by gang rape, and in another case, a man having sex with one of the king's concubines was, in fact, considered to be committing adultery.²⁹

The same sexual outlets were not available to the polygynous wife. Her only legitimate sexual partner was her husband, a man who, having acceptable alternatives, may or may not have desired intercourse with all of his wives. So while prohibitions on adultery appear fair on their face, among the nobility they restrained a husband only from having sexual relations with an already married woman, whereas they restrained a wife from having sexual relations with anybody except her husband. A monogamous society may well perceive adultery prohibitions as being aimed at preserving marriages, households, and families, but in polygynous societies they are clearly aimed at preserving and maintaining men's exclusive sexual access to wives and concubines. These prohibitions did not restrict men's actions when they violated a woman's marriage, but only when they violated another man's exclusive sexual right to a woman.

Whether the death penalty was applied to adulterous commoners was probably of little or no concern to the nobility. But aimed at the nobility, and especially at the less satisfied female partners of polygynous unions, the death penalty sought to secure the fidelity of polygynous wives and to guarantee the bloodlines of their offspring, although the primary instigators were apparently seen as the men.³⁰ In any event, the standard adultery prohibitions were aimed directly at limiting the illicit sexual activity of noble wives, with the apprehension of noblemen being entirely incidental.

But was adultery condoned in private? Could a noblewoman carry on an adulterous affair and not be penalized? This question is not concerned with

those affairs that went undiscovered since, *de facto*, they would not be punished. Those that became publicly known by virtue of their notoriety forced action and were penalized. But what of those adulterous affairs that became known to more parties than the participating couple, perhaps including the cuckolded husband, yet did not become public knowledge or were at least not openly and publicly acknowledged as taking place?

There is some suggestion of self-help for adultery. In the festival of the god Tlaloc during Huei Tozoztli, the king and nobles ascended the mountain of Tlalocan and then, just after dawn, left their shelter with a six- or seven-year-old child concealed on a litter. They took him before the image of Tlaloc, where the child was slain by that god's priests.³¹ As this was an elite ceremony, it is likely that so, too, was the child victim. Indeed, as the king and nobles all sought to keep the sacrifice secret, the dedicatee almost certainly had to be the child of one of the nobles. But the ceremony, in turn, raises the question of why a nobleman would wish to sacrifice his own child. Although religious devotion may be a motive, it cannot be completely dismissed that such a sacrifice was an ideal opportunity for a nobleman to eliminate a child he suspected of not being his own, a form of self-help that removed the suspect offspring but did not entail killing his wife, perhaps for lack of proof of her infidelity or possibly because she came from a politically powerful family. Lest it be thought that the adulterous wife got off scot-free, the loss of her child eliminated that avenue of social mobility. The death of her child deprived her of a son who might become a high officeholder (or a daughter who might marry a high noble or king) and thus enhance her status.

Events are not events unless and until they are publicly acknowledged, and whether the Aztecs permitted some unacknowledged infidelities to pass unpunished is not recorded, though in Tetzaco adulterers were reportedly sought out and punished even in the absence of a complaint, as responsibility for punishment resided solely with the state, not with the cuckold.³² But some instances of adultery among the nobility suggest that they might have been overlooked when convenient.

Although the sequence of events that called the breach to anyone's attention is unrecorded, Nezahualpilli executed one of his married daughters and her paramour for adultery, even though her husband said he was willing to forgive her. Nezahualpilli argued that if he allowed her to be forgiven, people would say that the husband had done so out of deference to

the king.³³ In an alternative account, Juan Bautista Pomar claimed that an adulterer could be pardoned if the offended party forgave them. Nezahualpilli nevertheless acted against his daughter in the face of public perception that this was the proper course, which suggests that, had the affair not become widely known, he might have let it pass unpunished or substantially so.³⁴ Complicating the situation, however, was the fact that the adulterer had been Nezahualpilli himself, who went unpunished.³⁵

The fact that many of the recorded cases involved a politically more powerful husband imposing the death penalty on his wayward wife and her politically weaker paramour suggests that if the cuckold were less powerful than the adulterer, the behavior may have gone unpunished as, indeed, there are no records of persons standing in these relative positions being executed or otherwise punished for adultery. In addition, the vagaries of politics often made possible an action that had been unthinkable the day before. One example may have been King Nezahualpilli's execution of his principal wife, who was also the daughter of King Axayacatl of Tenochtitlan. Axayacatl was unquestionably the political and military superior of Nezahualpilli, hence the repeated reference to the daughter's execution to prove the fairness of the laws. But when the incident occurred is unclear.

Axayacatl ruled Tenochtitlan from 1468 to 1481, while Nezahualpilli ruled the allied city of Tetzaco from 1472 to 1515; the two kings overlapped in rule for only nine years. The marriage between Nezahualpilli and Axayacatl's daughter likely occurred at some point during this period because before 1472, Nezahualpilli was only one of several heirs apparent to the throne of Tetzaco. Moreover, since he was born in 1465, Nezahualpilli was only seven when he ascended to the throne and only seventeen when Axayacatl died, so the marriage must have been late and essentially political. But during the period between the marriage and Axayacatl's death, however long it was, Nezahualpilli was not in a political position to punish his errant wife because Tetzaco was subordinate to Tenochtitlan. After Axayacatl's death in 1481, however, his daughter's political significance markedly declined. Her uncle Tizoc took the throne, but he was a weaker king and more concerned with the alliances he could establish through his own offspring or other closer kin. So the inexcusable actions of Nezahualpilli's wife may well have begun while her father was still alive and could protect her, but whether they persisted thereafter, the die had been cast. Her loss of power resulting from her father's death made her vulnerable such that her

punishment would be publicly supported, as it likely was by the offspring of Nezahualpilli's other wives.

Adultery may have flourished despite the women engaged to watch over the royal harems because of the enormous pressure on the potential queen-mothers to produce sons.³⁶ Although all royal wives must have felt that pressure, it must have been greatest on the commoner wives and concubines who would relapse into their original status if they failed to produce offspring through whom they could secure their future positions. Moreover, all the wives vying for the attention of one king must have increased the pressure enormously, as their own increasing age and the continual addition of younger wives further closed whatever window of opportunity may have been open. And even if a wife or concubine did have a son she had to do so relatively early in her marriage or he would not be old enough to succeed on the king's death. With her own fate, the fate of her children, and the fate of her natal family hanging in the balance, her success, dependent on her desirability, which would likely decline as she aged, depended on her prompt fecundity. How likely the royal wives who did not readily become pregnant were to have adulterous affairs in order to become pregnant can only be imagined, but even under the threat of execution, the drive to do so must have been very strong.

CHAPTER 9

Aztec Polygyny and Imperial Expansion

ROYAL WOMEN PLAYED an important part not only in politically strengthening their husbands in the internal politics of Tenochtitlan, but also in integrating the Aztec empire. To do so, however, the daughters of kings needed to be old enough to take an active part in the political process, primarily as wives and mothers of future rulers, during or after the reigns of their fathers, but also as potential officeholders themselves. Yet as most daughters would only reach maturity later in their fathers' reigns, the marital ties that connected an Aztec ruler with his grandsons, through his daughters who had married tributary kings, were probably twenty years or so behind the empire's expansion.

It was a rare king who sired daughters and continued to rule until they reached marriageable age. Yet the demand for such royal women was considerable. And here again the cohort was key. Many members of the king's cohort, but especially his full brothers, were older and had begun raising children years earlier. As a result, few kings had enough daughters to serve as wives to all the new or at least major tributaries accrued during their respective reigns, but the daughters of their full brothers, especially the older ones, were also available for that purpose. And because the king shared at least paternity with his half brothers, all of their daughters reflected the interests of the ruling lineage, and their becoming tributary brides also served to buttress the political importance of their own fathers as well as their maternal kin.

In addition to the king's nieces, royal daughters by various wives and sisters, and perhaps even granddaughters in some cases, were also sent to

conquered kings as brides to cement their relationships with the king. In most instances, the Aztec bride joined the subordinate king's other wives, but her status and the importance of the Aztecs to the tributary ruler meant that she would be among the more important wives, if not the most important.

These marital connections were not primarily aimed at linking the Aztec king with the subordinate ruler, as it would appear, even though the exchange was between the two rulers. The important relationship was a three-generational one linking the Aztec king or his successors to the tributary king's son by his Aztec wife. All Mexican kings, and especially subordinate ones, were typically succeeded by their sons by their politically most important wives. In the case of a tributary ruler, that wife was his Aztec bride. On the subordinate king's death, the son who then ascended the throne was most likely his half-Aztec son, the Aztec king's grandson, which further cemented the tie between that subordinate city-state and the empire. That grandson was also likely to receive an Aztec bride and would ultimately be succeeded by his son of that wife so that two rulers after originally being conquered by the Aztecs, a three-fourths-blood Aztec would be on the subordinate throne. Of course, these successor kings would also share the local culture and ethnicity and be locally influenced, but by the reign of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl, many of these foreign royal sons were being brought into Tenochtitlan for education there.

The bringing of tributary rulers' sons to Tenochtitlan for education has been interpreted as hostage-taking by the Aztecs to ensure the willing compliance of these sons' fathers, and it may have served that purpose to some degree, but its primary goal was to indoctrinate these heirs apparent as Aztecs in preparation for their eventual return and ascent to the local thrones.¹ In addition, the prevailing Aztec origin myth stressed descent from the original migrants from Aztlan, and so these "foreign" princelings, who could not strictly claim to be Mexicas (people from the Valley of Mexico) but were descendants of the people from Aztlan, could thus use this Aztec relation to bind themselves to the empire.



Integrating the empire could have been achieved far more quickly by replacing the reigning kings and imposing new ones, but the collateral costs of

so doing were enormous. In one of the few well-documented cases in which this replacement was attempted, with the Chalca city-states, it was fundamentally unsuccessful and left the people resentful of their overlords.² Linkage by intermarriage required considerable time but was much less expensive and intrusive as far as the subordinate populace was concerned. However, the other nobles likely objected more.

Because Aztec tribute demands drained off some of the local wealth, less remained in the tributary city-state to sustain the local nobility, with the result that the number of local nobles who could be supported likely shrank. Whether or not the consequence of becoming a tributary, subordinate states, on average, likely maintained nobles only two kin links from the king rather than the three that were usual in Tenochtitlan. On the royal succession of the Aztec bride's son, moreover, all local nobles were instantly distanced from the throne by one additional kin link, resulting in the early falling off of the lower nobles into the ranks of commoners. So while the tributary king may have welcomed the arrival of an Aztec bride to cement his connection to the empire, his nobles must have been far less pleased, and the birth of an Aztec son would in all probability have set them scrambling to marry their daughters into the new lineage.

The status of the tributary king's other wives would also have declined, but that of the wives from cities that were still independent of the Aztec empire must have declined far more than those from the subordinate city and other allied cities. The drop in status of the wives from cities that were now outside the Aztec empire must have been substantial, as would have been their aspirations for their children, which were immediately reduced to little or nothing. In short, the Aztec strategy of linking subordinate rulers to Tenochtitlan by marriage also degraded or destroyed the new tributary's ties to local city-states that remained hostile to the empire. At the same time, these disruptions in the new tributary kingdom also politically weakened the foreign states to which it had been allied, as their ties to the now-conquered state were severed, leaving them more vulnerable to subsequent Aztec conquest unless and until they could create new ties with other still-independent states, a process that could take years and probably an entire generation.

Seen as a whole, the empire was composed of differential zones of Aztec alliances, depending on how long subordinate city-states had been tributaries. The city-states conquered over the previous twenty years, or the length

of the current king's reign, would have primary allegiance to that king and his matrikin, certainly throughout his reign and extending after the next king came to power. It was therefore important to retain the throne in as close a group of upper nobles as possible so that even in the event of a cohort shift, tributary alliances would still be tied by kinship to someone close to the throne, if not on it.

Polygyny and the Conquest of Mexico

MANY FACTORS CONTRIBUTED to the Spanish conquest of Mexico from 1519 to 1521, and polygyny, too, played a role, a far more significant one than has generally been recognized. Although the Spaniards were few, they were recognized, not as dominant, which they were not, but as a force multiplier for indigenous troops; at least two, and perhaps three, allied groups tried to bring them into the interlocking kin network that linked the elites of Mesoamerica into a series of overlapping relationships. On being defeated in battle, the Maya of Potonchan gave the Spaniards twenty Native women, and though they were received and interpreted as a gift of slaves, these women may have been given in an attempt to establish intermarriage and thus potentially important kin ties.¹ Whether or not it was true in that case, intermarriage was a definite goal of the Totonacs of Cempoallan on the Gulf Coast, who presented the Spaniards with royal and noble daughters.² Subsequently, the Tlaxcaltecs also gave the Spaniards royal and noble daughters to marry, whom, by this time, the Spaniards were finally beginning to recognize for what they were.³

How effective these attempts were in establishing links to the Spaniards is uncertain, especially as the latter still did not completely understand their significance. Moreover, such marriages were effective in establishing political relationships over the long term, whereas the Spaniards regarded the entire endeavor of conquering Mexico as a relatively short-term affair. Nevertheless, the Native network of marital ties, both intact and damaged, played a major role in the Spaniards' march toward Tenochtitlan.

The Tlaxcaltecs, who quickly recognized how they could use the Spaniards for their own ends, had recently lost an ally in the nearby major city

of Cholollan. It had become allied with the Aztecs, apparently after the death of the previous king, who was related to some of the ruling families of Tlaxcallan. The king's death set in motion a shift in power as his successor was from a different lineage with either existing or newly established ties to Tenochtitlan. Already alarmed by the loss of other allied cities nearby, the Tlaxcaltecs supplied the Spaniards with substantial military support and aimed them toward Cholollan. On arrival, the Spaniards were welcomed into the city of Cholollan, but after a few days, Cortés assembled the ruler and his nobles and massacred them with the assistance of the Tlaxcaltecs. The people of Cholollan had been predictably divided since the previous ruler had left many disenfranchised noble allies, and the Spaniards now placed one, a pro-Tlaxcallan noble, on the throne. Who that man was or whether he would have reliably pro-Tlaxcaltec sentiments could not have been known by the Spaniards, so the brains behind the entire operation were doubtlessly Tlaxcaltec. By placing their handpicked candidate on the throne, the Tlaxcaltecs reestablished Cholollan's ties to Tlaxcallan, and the latter's regional political dominance was at least partially restored.⁴ Again, how much of this was understood by the Spaniards is uncertain, but the Tlaxcaltecs saw it with absolute clarity.

When the Spaniards and their allies marched on to Tenochtitlan, they were welcomed into the city without opposition. But once there, Cortés seized Moteuczoma Xocoyotl and effectively ruled through him for the next seven and a half months until events forced him and his men to flee the city. Crucially, Moteuczoma Xocoyotl was dead when the Spaniards fled; they claimed he had been struck and killed by a stone thrown by the Aztecs, but he was almost certainly murdered by the Spaniards, along with forty other kings and nobles of Tenochtitlan and the surrounding cities, as the Native sources state.⁵ These losses were to have a profound effect on subsequent events, not simply because of the lack of leaders, but because the network of interconnected royal and noble kin that linked the cities of the Valley of Mexico and beyond was massively disrupted. Even a single royal death could disrupt existing political ties and alliances, and with forty such deaths, the disruptions would have been enormous, leaving various pretenders (along with their kin supporters) to vie for the now-vacant offices.

When Cortés and his allies returned to the Valley of Mexico at the end of December 1520, the elite kin network was in even greater disarray than it had been when he fled six months earlier. Smallpox, which arrived with

Panfilo de Narváez's expedition in the spring of 1520, had reached the valley that autumn, felling many Aztecs, notably Moteuczoma Xocoyotl's successor, his brother Cuitlahua, and at the time of the Spaniards' return, another royal successor had not yet been crowned. But even more devastating to the Aztecs, Cortés had acquired an ally, Ixtlilxóchitl of Tetzaco, or, more accurately, Ixtlilxóchitl had seized on the opportunity that presented itself and allied himself with Cortés.



The cause of Ixtlilxóchitl's defection lay in an earlier succession struggle that the Spanish presence now allowed him to revisit. When his father, King Nezahualpilli of Tetzaco, died in 1515, leaving many sons, his succession was not simply resolved internally. Moteuczoma Xocoyotl inserted himself into the issue and used his influence to place Cacama on the throne. As one of Nezahualpilli's sons, Cacama was a legitimate contender for the throne, but he was also Moteuczoma Xocoyotl's nephew and his selection caused considerable internal dissension among the other contenders in Tetzaco. Ixtlilxóchitl was also one of Nezahualpilli's sons and, disgruntled, he fled the city, raised an army, and began a bitter civil war during which he succeeded in conquering the northern half of Tetzaco's territory, wresting away control of many of its tributary cities. Thereafter, Cacama ruled Tetzaco and the southern half of the Acolhua realm, while Ixtlilxóchitl established a capital at Acolman from which he ruled the northern half of the realm.

There the matter uneasily rested until the death of Cacama, who had been among the forty kings and nobles slain by Cortés as the Spaniards fled from Tenochtitlan in 1520, when Ixtlilxóchitl saw his opportunity.⁶ Going to Tlaxcallan, he allied with Cortés, and when the Spanish/Tlaxcaltec army returned to the Valley of Mexico, he led them peacefully into Tetzaco, where they were received by Cacama's newly installed successor, King Coanacoch, who then fled to Tenochtitlan. Throughout the rest of the military campaign, other local rulers either fled to Tenochtitlan, and thereby lost control of their cities, or shifted their alliances to the Spaniards, whether standing by passively or actively supplying and aiding their armies and thereby risking Aztec retaliation. Many of these rulers were newly enthroned after the murder of their predecessors by Cortés, and their own

positions and alliances were not yet secure. The geopolitical situation within the Valley of Mexico placed these lesser kings in a difficult position with no easy resolution.

It is less likely that the rulers who allied with the Spaniards were simply intimidated into so doing than that these local rulers sought out the Spaniards as the better of the two options facing them. Not only did these newly installed rulers still have a tenuous grasp on power, but many had reached their thrones shortly after their predecessors' deaths and almost certainly had begun trying to reinforce their ties to the Aztec king, Cuitlahua. Doing so should have been relatively easy and would have entailed few power shifts among the nobles of their own cities, as both Cuitlahua and his predecessor were in the same Axayacatl cohort; many of these new kings who came to power would have had the local support of their existing nobility. But then Cuitlahua died unexpectedly in early December 1520, rendering all kin ties and alliances to those close to him moot. The next Aztec king, Cuitlahua's successor, was Cuauhtemoc, who was not in the Axayacatl lineage but was descended from Ahuizotl and therefore represented a new cohort. Consequently, although many of the other rulers' existing kin ties remained relevant since Cuauhtemoc was the nephew of both Moteuczoma Xocoyotl and Cuitlahua, the new kin ties were not as close as ties to the Ahuizotl cohort would have been. Thus, these rulers' domestic political positions were immediately less secure than they had been when they took their thrones. So with the death of Cuitlahua, not only were the most important kin links typically severed at both ends, but those that remained were weaker than they might have been, and the disruption caused by Cuauhtemoc's succession was far greater than the mere replacement of his predecessor would normally have been.

Such was the political chaos wrought by the Spanish in their murder of kings of the Valley of Mexico: each time a successor king was named in one of these cities, that act alone caused disaffection among the other unsuccessful aspirants. Before the arrival of the Spaniards, such nobles would have nevertheless accepted the new king as he would have had the support of a majority of the nobles, the rare example of Ixtlilxóchitl's rebellion notwithstanding. But now, two new Aztec kings in rapid succession and coming from different though related cohorts further destabilized the city-states at precisely the same time that the Spanish presence offered a political counterbalance with the allied Tlaxcaltecs and Ixtlilxóchitl's Acolhua, a

competing power with whom the disaffected might ally. And this possibility also affected those already legitimately on the throne. If, on one hand, a reigning local king felt it was in his best interest to ally with the Spaniards, given the Spanish, Tlaxcaltec, and now Acolhua presence between his city and Tenochtitlan, he might. But if he did, the other aspirants to his throne could seek closer ties to the Aztecs in an attempt to overthrow their king and succeed him. If, on the other hand, a king sought to strengthen his ties to Tenochtitlan, it was the pretenders who would seek a Spanish/Tlaxcaltec/Acolhua alliance. The newly created political situation offered few safe havens, and every choice generated its own opponents.

Some cities, notably the Chalca city-states that for an entire generation had been ruled by an Aztec military governor (*cuaulhtlatoani*) rather than retaining their own kings and being integrated into the Aztec kin network through royal intermarriage, turned on the Aztecs almost immediately. Others shifted their alliances opportunistically, while still others likely realigned based on the succession struggles that arose on the death or defection of previous rulers. Almost automatically, rulers who sided with the Spaniards generated opposition from other aspirants to the throne, just as those who remained loyal to the Aztecs watched as opposing nobles took the opportunity to side with the loyalists' enemies. Without strong Aztec support, which Tenochtitlan was no longer in a position to provide, all power struggles played out against the background provided by the Conquest, but based on local dynamics. And as a royal son himself, Ixtlilxóchitl was ideally positioned, far better, indeed, than Cortés's Tlaxcaltec allies, to know both the stakes and the players in the Valley of Mexico and to manipulate them accordingly. In fact, he probably already possessed kin ties to many of the newly installed kings in the valley.

It was a delicate situation for the local rulers favoring either side. And most were politically paralyzed, uncertain which course of action was more beneficial to themselves and afraid to take any decisive steps toward either side. Thus, for most of the siege of Tenochtitlan, the cities in the Valley of Mexico gave minor support to the side that appeared to be succeeding at the moment but refused to take any definitive action that would irrevocably commit them to either.

Whatever the military merits of either side during the Conquest, the shifting allegiances of the surrounding towns and cities, under the leadership of vacillating and opportunistic leaders, played a far larger role in its

outcome than the combatants on the field of battle. Without their support, the Aztecs were fighting from and defending only their capital, Tenochtitlan, and not their empire. Moreover, they drew supplies, soldiers, and other support from only a few of their tributaries around the lakeshore once the siege of the city began. Without the effective neutrality, if not outright military assistance, and the supplies and manpower of the surrounding towns lying to their rear, the Conquest would have come to a rapid and unhappy conclusion for the Spaniards and their allies. And kinship, both reinforcing and competing, was the foundation of the decisions to supply or withhold aid.

The Conquest was nominally concluded on August 13, 1521, with the surrender of Cuauhtemoc.⁷ Its history as conventionally presented was one of military battles and campaigns. But undergirding the events of the Conquest were the complicated interconnections of kinship, cohorts, marriages, and alliances that bound kings and rulers into a variable and complex fabric of mutual interdependence. These relations were unraveled, however, by Spanish assassinations of kings and nobles hostile to their aim and the massive depopulation wrought by the smallpox that accompanied their arrival. New rulers arose, of course, but they did so in a far more uncertain world and were hobbled by other suddenly strengthened pretenders to their thrones who were ready to oppose their political choices, whichever they might be. Thus, the kin and marital ties that gently but ever so tightly bound the empire together, once frayed, fell into many different sections, and each group struggled to survive in a new political reality.

The Marital Heritage of Europe

THE SPANISH COLONIZATION of Mexico, set in motion by the Conquest, was a major clash between Old and New World cultural values and practices. And most of this conflict was resolved by the dominance of the Old. But the Old World cultural practices were not themselves simply givens; many of them were comparatively new, yet imposed on the New World as though they were immutable truths.

The primary factors in Europe's domination of the New World are most commonly thought to be military, political, economic, religious, or intellectual. But beyond the immediate events of the military conquest, the most devastating, though ignored, factor in the subjugation of Mexico was imposition of the European family structure as it had emerged over the previous millennium, which transformed polygynous Native societies into monogamous ones, as nominally befit Christian teachings.

The roots of monogamy, however, did not lie in early Christian theology. Although waning, polygyny was still practiced in Judaism at the time of Jesus. Moreover, throughout the Roman world, marriage was a civil matter, and it did not fall within the province of the Church until quite late.¹ Monogamy's emergence in Europe nevertheless pitted the power of the Church against the practices of secular society, with the eventual domination of the former over the imperfect acceptance of the latter.

Whether that struggle was a primarily religious one that happened to have social consequences or whether it was primarily political but wrapped in religious justifications depends on one's perspective. As the Church has repeatedly demonstrated, virtually anything can be theologically justified.

Yet rarely do the Church's positions go against its interests as an institution, suggesting that the actual reason for such changes lies in their practical consequences and not in their intellectual origins.



By the sixteenth century, Western Europe was decidedly monogamous in public ideology if not always in sexual practice. Although nominally embraced at that time, monogamy was still a relatively recent development in Europe, which struggled to move from a polygynist past to sixteenth-century monogamy. The primary promoter of monogamy was the Roman Catholic Church, and its long struggle to control marriage, though cast as a religious one, can be more easily seen as economic in that the control over who marries is also control over who inherits.² Despite the fact that polygyny was accepted in Jewish society from Old through New Testament times, during which Christianity arose, the dominant political power of the day, Rome, was monogamist, and monogamy became deeply rooted in the Christian tradition.³ This shift was not the simple adoption of Roman custom, as Roman law held marriage to be a civil matter, but a reinterpretation of marriage as a religious matter under the exclusive control of the Church.

As Christianity became the dominant religion in the West, the Roman Catholic Church emerged not only as a spiritual body, but also as one that determined both social policy and law. This the Church did primarily through edicts emanating from a series of general councils at which bishops met to debate and decide Church doctrine. Important in these discussions, if not the key issues, were sexual practices both of the Church's own clergy and of the laity.

In an attempt to regulate the sexual excesses of the clergy, the First Council of Nicaea, held in 325, forbade bishops, priests, deacons, and all other clerics from allowing any women other than their mothers, sisters, and aunts to live with them—a ban that apparently did not take hold and was therefore reiterated in 787.⁴ In 451 the Council of Chalcedon forbade monks to marry virgins consecrated to God on pain of excommunication.⁵ And in 787 the Second Council of Nicaea forbade monasteries that would house both men and women from being built, as they had apparently become infamous for their sexual activities.⁶ However, such dictates reflect more of what was actually going on rather than imposing any meaningful restrictions.

In the mid-eighth century, the Church declared the indissolubility of marriage, an edict that was aimed at the laity, and then in the first and second Lateran Council of 1123 and 1139, respectively, the Church forbade priests and other clerics to marry or have concubines.⁷ But clerical marriages were a widespread practice, and the councils only ordered that those priests, nuns, and other religious who were already married be separated and do penance.⁸ This edict met with little success, and priests with families were sufficiently common that their sons were formally barred from helping in Masses unless they also became monks or canons.⁹ Indeed, in 1215 the Church decreed that the sons of canons, and especially illegitimate sons, could not be made canons in the same churches as their fathers.¹⁰

The clergy's sexual abuses apparently went far beyond these, however, and the Church declared that clerics who were not only married but who were bigamists were to be stripped of their clerical privileges, which would make them subject to civil law.¹¹ But this decree was apparently not effective enough, and the seventeenth general council (1431–1449) decreed that clerics who had concubines were to be deprived of their revenues for three months, provided they dismissed their concubines, and to lose all their revenue if they did not.¹² As late as the fifth Lateran Council in 1512–1517, clerics who were having sexual relations were warned that they would be punished.¹³

In short, the Church directed priests and monks not to have sexual relations with women. But controlling the sexual practices of its religious was not the Church's primary concern, and it also had a number of fallback positions if the prohibition on sexual relations with women failed. If priests and monks continued to have sexual relations with women despite the Church's opposition, these would apparently be accepted, and the Church would then ban the religious from marrying. But neither was marriage among its religious the bedrock principle the Church opposed, as it pronounced that if the religious nevertheless married women, then they were not to have children by them, especially sons. But if they did have sex with women, marry them, and have sons, then those sons could not inherit the property of the Church. Although these violations of Church policy were officially disapproved of, each was nevertheless accepted once the prior prohibition had been violated, which clearly indicates the real purpose of the regulations—the retention of Church land and wealth rather its dissipation through inheritance by clerical offspring.

Church regulation of sexual matters was garbed in ecclesiastical rationalizations that may have been accepted by the faithful. But the collateral consequence of regulating the sexual practices of the clergy, that is, to control and maintain Church wealth, is also apparent. Control of clerical sexual practices, however, could only maintain what the Church already had. To acquire that wealth, the Church had also intruded into the sexual and marital affairs of the general populace, whether Christians or not, by repeatedly defining and refining the marital relation—not only by declaring itself the sole arbiter of legitimate marriage, but also by declaring it a sacrament and thus indissoluble.



The origin of monogamy in the West clearly lay with the Church, but especially in Spain, Church doctrine was also reinforced by secular law.¹⁴ The *Leyes de Toro* promulgated by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1502 clarified some of the confusion of earlier laws.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the most important legal code in effect for the various provinces of Spain at the time of the Conquest was the thirteenth-century compendium of King Alfonso X, in which virtually all social relationships were regulated in considerable detail. Among these was marriage, which was civilly defined as a sacrament and was for life.¹⁶ By the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, Church doctrine stressed the indissolubility of marriage and allowed divorce only when the marriage was entered into illegitimately, as when the bride and groom were too closely related.¹⁷ The Church also defined whom one could marry by outlawing marriage between blood relatives, a flexible standard that the Church altered to serve its own purposes.¹⁸ Fornication was also outlawed for both clerics and laypersons.¹⁹

Though limited by the Church, civil law also attempted to regulate the sexual and marital lives of clerics. Thus, it barred a married person from becoming a bishop unless his wife took holy orders first and also barred a priest who had married a virgin and who then committed adultery by having intercourse with her afterward.²⁰ Priests were forbidden to keep concubines, married men who took holy orders could no longer live with their wives, and those who married while in holy orders could be punished, as could those who committed adultery with a married woman.²¹

Adultery was outlawed generally, but only if it was public, and marital

relations could be compelled to continue unless the adulterer was defeated in court, but the marriage could be compelled to continue if both parties were guilty of the same offense.²² Concubines were likewise outlawed, but having one was regarded as less wicked than having many, so the practice was excused in some cases.²³ Indeed, a woman who was never a slave and was free of all servitude could be accepted as a concubine, and any unmarried man not in a religious order could keep a concubine, provided she was not a virgin, nor under twelve years of age, nor a widow with a good reputation, nor one who was his relative to the fourth degree of affinity, which would be considered incest.²⁴ Nobles also could have concubines.²⁵

Illegitimate children could not inherit from their parents without a will if there were other legitimate children or legitimate descendants. They could be left things while the parents lived but no more than one-fifth of the parents' goods on their deaths. The parents of illegitimate children did have obligations, however, and were required to give these offspring food.²⁶ Moreover, the king and pope could be petitioned to declare the offspring of concubines legitimate.²⁷ In short, the principle of monogamy and the outlawing of concubines by the Church, though of long standing, were very imperfectly adopted in society, even by the time of the Spanish conquest.



At least in part, the Protestant Reformation emerged in opposition to this morass of clerical sexual contradictions and the tight, often-hypocritical control over marriage and divorce. As a defensive countermeasure, the Church instituted the Gregorian reforms in the sixteenth century.

The Gregorian reforms declared marriage to be a true order that could facilitate salvation, and it was held to be indissoluble even for widows and widowers.²⁸ But Church dictates were honored in the breach, and though priests were forbidden to have concubines, they were common, as was adultery.²⁹ Nevertheless, the Protestant Reformation challenged the many flagrant hypocrisies of the Church and motivated it to take more action against such sexual abuses.³⁰

Largely in response to this challenge, the Catholic Church called the Council of Trent, which met from 1545 to 1563 to promulgate a set of canons and decrees and a new catechism meant to respond to the Protestant

allegations of corruption, to set forth official Church doctrine on faith and practice, and tacitly to acknowledge and repudiate past lapses by Church officials.

Many of the council's pronouncements were directed at marriage and sexual behavior. Matrimony was declared a sacrament and canon 2 forbade Christians to have more than one wife.³¹ Canon 7 expressly stated that marriages could not be dissolved for reasons of adultery by one or both parties as long as both still lived, even if the one seeking remarriage was the innocent party.³² And canon 9 denounced as anathema marriages by clerics in sacred orders or by regulars who had made solemn professions of chastity, and this canon described proceedings against clerics who kept concubines.³³

Especially after the Council of Trent, concubinage was denounced as a sin for the unmarried and an even worse one for the married, as it was regarded as an expression of contempt for the sacrament of marriage (a long-term and stable form of concubinage, known as *barraganía*, had been given limited acceptance in Las Siete Partidas).³⁴ Men guilty of concubinage were subject to excommunication if they failed to cease after three admonitions by the ordinary. And women who publicly lived with adulterers or concubinaries were also subject to punishment, including expulsion from the city or diocese with the aid of the secular arm, in addition to the other penalties for adultery and concubinage.³⁵

The Council of Trent promulgated a new catechism in 1564 for the avowed purpose of combating false beliefs and stating the true positions of the Church.³⁶ This catechism clearly stated that marriage was a sacrament and was therefore indissoluble, and it expressly forbade adultery and fornication.³⁷ These new statements were not truly innovations, but they did serve to reinforce and to disseminate existing Church prohibitions.

Actively combating the sexual excesses proscribed by the Church was the Inquisition. Its early efforts led to abuses and excesses, and as early as 1512 the Inquisition in Spain underwent reform and was prohibited from hearing cases of bigamy unless heresy was also involved.³⁸ Cases of bigamy alone, which were punishable by five years in the galleys for men, were authorized to be heard only by bishops, though the tribunal continued to hear them despite the prohibition, arguing that as a violation of the sacrament of marriage, bigamy implied heresy.³⁹ Nevertheless, bigamy remained common, amounting to 5 percent of the cases heard.⁴⁰

Bishops tried to impose the views of the Council of Trent on matrimony

in Spain and denounced the common practice of betrothed young people living together. Despite this, alternative sexual relations were pervasive, including concubinage and prostitution.⁴¹ It was only after the Council of Trent that the Church required the blessing of the parish priest to render a marriage valid, thus tightening its control over the institution even more.⁴² But despite the Church's official stance, illicit sexual relations within the Church, including priests soliciting sex during confession, continued to be widespread.⁴³



At the time of the Spanish conquest, the Church in Western Europe was on the verge of fragmenting. The final split with the Eastern Church had taken place in the mid-eleventh century, but the Roman Church had maintained its monopoly in the West, despite the persistent recurrence of “heresies,” prior to Martin Luther’s stand in 1517, which formally led to its split, and Western Europe’s, into two far-from-cohesive sides: Protestant (mostly in the north) and Roman Catholic (mostly in the south), which were locked in a mortal struggle. The Roman Church remained not only dominant but exclusive in Spain, as it was in colonial Mexico. But whether the cause of the split was the corruption and abuses of the Roman Church, as seen by the Protestants, or the opportunism, sexual libertinism, and theological error of the Protestants, as seen by the Catholics, the challenge posed by the Reformation forced the Roman Church to attempt to reform its practices and doctrine. And this Counter-Reformation was sternly imposed in the New World, less perhaps from idealism than from a need to eliminate religious opposition and competition. But whether Protestant or Catholic, Christians remained nominally monogamous. The clerical prohibition on priests and monks marrying was reinforced not only as a matter of theological policy, but also to distinguish the Roman Church from the Protestant, whose clerics were permitted to marry.



It is easy to see the religious and secular mechanisms by which monogamy was enforced in the West, however imperfectly. But since monogamy is a distinctly minority practice among the world’s cultures, scholars have

debated why it arose in the West and came to dominate the world as the numerically majority practice, though its occurrence has more often been ignored or simply presumed to be the norm.

Perhaps the most cogent cultural account of the rise of monogamy in the West is Jack Goody's, which goes a long way toward explaining how the Church accumulated the wealth it sought so diligently to maintain by its control of clerical sexual excesses.⁴⁴ With considerable supporting evidence, Goody argues that the adoption of monogamy was a consequence of the dominance of the Christian Church.⁴⁵ After all, polygyny seems to be the preferred marital strategy among the world's cultures, and monogamy is likely to emerge only when the need for polygyny is already weak.⁴⁶

Goody tied the Church-promoted shift from polygyny to monogamy directly to inheritance practices. Since much of the logic of polygyny stems from the need to create heirs in the event of a barren first wife, and to do so without the social disruption of divorce, Goody interprets the shift away from polygyny and toward monogamy as a move against these interests.⁴⁷ While polygyny would largely guarantee the continuity of wealth in the family through time, monogamy would increase the incidence of heirless deaths and therefore the likelihood of the Church being the benefactor. In fact, Church holdings in Europe doubled between the eighth and ninth centuries, and it is estimated that the Church owned fully a third of all land in Merovingian France.⁴⁸

The Church began to make a series of declarations that fundamentally changed the way families were regarded. First, it outlawed polygyny. But the actual shift in marriage practice was slow in coming as it ran counter to the interests of entrenched power holders and required centuries for its ideological underpinnings to be accepted. Then, two centuries later, after that shift had time to become at least partially internalized, concubinage, too, was banned. Both practices, however, persisted long after they were nominally disallowed. For example, Charlemagne abided by Church dictates by remaining monogamous, but he did so by sequentially marrying and divorcing a series of wives while also simultaneously maintaining multiple concubines.⁴⁹ Although marriage was defined as a sacrament and was necessarily controlled by the Church, and as such was also indissoluble, it was never as securely in the Church's control as the other sacraments, and families competed for control of who one would or could marry.⁵⁰ Monogamy was thus established and sanctified through Church control over

marriage, by which it increasingly gained power in the West. Despite these early attempts by the Church to control marriage and other sexual relations, it did not achieve this control, at least formally, until at least the thirteenth century in places such as England.⁵¹

The Church had always been concerned both with accumulating wealth and with retaining it.⁵² Regardless of any religious justifications for clerical celibacy, which was not declared until the late fourth century, the prohibition of clerical marriage and concubinage, however unsuccessfully, provided the Church with a religious cadre that was both cheaper, as it stripped priests of costly dependents, and more mobile, as they were not tied down by families.⁵³ And as with clerical celibacy, the promotion of monogamy also had profound economic consequences.

As a fundamentally agrarian economy, early medieval Europe was wealthy primarily in land, most of which was controlled by the nobility. But polygyny and concubinage promoted partible inheritance, which worked against the accumulation or maintenance of large estates over time since no single line of descent was generally recognized above the others. Occasionally, one line might be preferred over others, as when a first wife was raised over subsequent ones or a married wife was given preference over concubines, although usually not to the exclusion of all other potential heirs. Impartible inheritance, however, became dominant with the rise of monogamy, which had a series of significant consequences, some anticipated but others probably not.

Monogamy, coupled with the rising concern for legitimacy, not only increased the likelihood that a man might die without producing a legitimate heir, but also fostered an increasing emphasis on lineage.⁵⁴ Patrilineal descent, which typified Western Europe, concomitantly encouraged impartible inheritance.⁵⁵ Property descent through the patriline does keep realty within family lines, as traditional explanations have it. This system also excludes outsider men from ownership, while simultaneously allowing the incorporation of unrelated women as wives. Since inheritance does not typically descend to the woman directly, the importance of the matriline is diminished. Spain, however, was a notable exception in Western Europe, as its legal tradition was not derived from the Romans but from the Visigoths, who bequeathed Spain the legal principle that women could inherit equally with men, and it was specifically this Castilian law that was transplanted to the New World.⁵⁶

This new importance of the nuclear family and its patriline was reflected in European religious art as early as the tenth century and was fully public by the early twelfth in the Tree of Jesse.⁵⁷ The Tree of Jesse was then depicted in glass in the new Gothic cathedrals and subsequently in stucco in Mexico; it showed the lineal descent of Jesus (or, in this case ascent, as Jesus is placed at the top rather than at the bottom as in most genealogical depictions).⁵⁸ Beginning with his ancestor Jesse, the tree showed a series of patriarchs, the number depending on the space available to the artist, leading forebearer by forebearer up to Mary and finally to Jesus.⁵⁹ Because Jesus's patriline is rather short in Christian doctrine, the Tree of Jesse showed his earthly patriline only as it ascended to Mary and then to him, as, theologically, his patriline can only be traced for a single generation. Thus, despite showing Jesus being descended from Mary, the Tree of Jesse nevertheless clearly emphasized the patriline, which was then religiously supported and which reinforced the emergent idea in second millennium Europe that the paternal link was the dominant kin tie.⁶⁰

Also in the twelfth century, the emergent cult of the child Jesus became important.⁶¹ Its significance was apparently tied to the diminution of family sizes due to monogamy and the fervent religious efforts to engender an heir, preferably male. Another significant social shift at this time was the adoption of family names. People in polygynous Europe had not possessed surnames. In a first generation, all offspring may have had the same father and would have defined themselves in relation to him, but thereafter, while offspring might have continued to recognize that early family lineage founder, each subsequent man was also a potential lineage founder such that the "families" of brothers might easily diverge, rendering the original lineage sire's name unimportant.

In fact, only after monogamy became dominant did family names appear in Europe, in the eleventh century. They emerged simultaneously with stronger patrilineal lines and did so first among the nobility, as it was they who held and bequeathed property.⁶² Only subsequently did surnames spread throughout society and eventually become adopted by the lower classes.

Goody is apparently correct that the Church promoted monogamy to reduce numbers of potential heirs so that it would inherit from the increasing number of men who died without heirs, as the Church became massively wealthy through its landholdings. But the Church's accumulation of wealth did not depend on the increasing number of heirless landowners alone. It was

coupled with the subsequent invention of purgatory, which was used to reinforce a male-centered, monogamous family structure at a time when the Church was still struggling to do away with polygynous unions.⁶³ But purgatory as a concept had an even more direct economic purpose.

Like the promise of heaven, the threat of hell is always an effective way to extract wealth from the faithful.⁶⁴ But before the belief in purgatory fully emerged in Christianity at the end of the twelfth century and was formalized by the fourteenth, the faithful supported the Church by paying for Masses for their souls, in the hope of going to heaven when they died.⁶⁵ Thus, they supported the Church in life, but once deceased, neither they nor their descendants needed to do so any longer and the further flow of wealth on their behalf eased. But with the invention of purgatory, souls no longer went directly to heaven or hell but to a supernatural halfway house from which the tormented soul's extraction depended upon still further prayers and Masses.⁶⁶ In one deft, though contested, move, the Church invented a requirement that would significantly increase bequests because the faithful not only needed Masses said for their souls during their lives, but after their deaths as well.⁶⁷

The introduction of purgatory after monogamy and the banning of concubines was not merely coincidental. In a polygynous system, few offspring, who had the option of emphasizing multiple ties to other wealthy and powerful families, were likely to drain their own wealth voluntarily for the benefit of a dead ancestor whose importance could be minimized at will. Only when an ancestor could not be disavowed, as in monogamous societies, would afterlife obligations be unavoidable.

Goody in his focus on polygyny—the need to produce an heir in the event of a barren first wife and in preference to adoption—nevertheless emphasizes the biological functions of marriage rather than its political aspects. The shift from polygyny to monogamy, at least among the ruling elite, effectively excluded competitor families from succession and inheritance. So while the original basis for it—as far as the populace was concerned—was religious, this convenient justification also benefited the patriarch and his line and may have been readily adopted, especially since concubinage was permitted to continue. Moreover, monogamy allowed more stability in succession among rulers and the wealthy alike because fewer families would be in competition, and the practice redrew the map of class structure throughout Europe.

The monogamy that the Spaniards sought to impose on the New World was thus not a natural development from the Old World. Rather: it was a peculiar development tied directly to Church interests that, by the sixteenth century, its practitioners may have seen as natural and even divine in origin, even if imperfectly accepted in practice. But monogamy also involved political and economic implications whose origins were likely no longer recognized, but whose consequences were to have a massive impact on the New World.

Although acceptance of monogamy was slow in Europe and incomplete even by the sixteenth century, the Spanish priests blithely imposed monogamy on the New World, in complete disregard of the many struggles that had gone on in Europe over marriage practices.

Monogamy fell on Mesoamerica with a tremendous and virtually immediate impact. The exceedingly slow adoption of monogamy in Europe over the course of a millennium, which had allowed the succeeding generations to adjust to its imposition and attendant social consequences, however imperfect, was not allowed to the Natives of Mexico. Instead, this change in marriage practice and all its social consequences were imposed in a single generation, a mere twenty to twenty-five years.

Undermining Aztec Society

FOLLOWING COLUMBUS'S FIRST voyage of exploration to the New World in 1492, Spanish explorers and adventurers flooded into the West Indies, variously exploring, conquering, and settling the islands and the surrounding coastal areas of Venezuela, Panama, and Florida. Cuba was explored and conquered by Diego Velásquez de Cuéllar from 1511 to 1514, and it was from there that the first expeditions were dispatched to Mexico: Francisco Hernández de Córdoba in early 1517, followed by Juan de Grijalva in 1518, and then by Hernán Cortés in 1519. After more than two years of struggle and warfare, Tenochtitlan nominally fell to the Spaniards, though more accurately it fell to the Tlaxcaltecs and other Indian allies who comprised 99 percent of the forces fighting against the Aztecs.¹

It is frequently thought that the Spaniards most disliked the Aztec practices that clashed so greatly with their own, notably human sacrifice, which they saw as a diabolical religious exercise despite their own history of religious purges in the newly reconquered Moorish Spain—the most extreme expression of the Inquisition in Europe—and the number of political opponents who were killed in European states. Other Aztec practices and institutions that were similar to European ones, such as kings, nobles, commoners, slaves, feudal-like landholding, tribute, and warfare, raised hardly an eyebrow, yet one aspect of Aztec culture that was roundly condemned was polygyny, apparently not so much because it contrasted so markedly with European practice, but likely because it dredged up a European past that was not yet entirely eclipsed and one whose continuance undermined the power of the modern Church and state.



The conquest of Mexico did not lead to the first European settlement in the New World, as this process was already under way in the West Indies. Nevertheless, the Spanish arrival in Mexico was the first confrontation between Europeans and indigenous American peoples of a comparable social and political complexity. Instead of simply pushing aside Native institutions and practices and replacing them with European ones as they had done in the Caribbean, the Spaniards were, for the first time, forced to confront Native social patterns directly, altering some, displacing others, and using, if not adopting, still others. Consequently, the conquest of Mexico was more a merger than a displacement, and in terms of family organization, it affected the cultural as well as the biological realms.

Although the conquest of Mexico was a military venture (buttressed by demographic and ideological factors), Mexico was not immediately pacified following the fall of Tenochtitlan in August 1521. For years after the Conquest, the Spaniards feared an Indian uprising, although one never came; what lay before them instead was the conquest of the peace.²

Many of the practices introduced by the Spaniards undermined the Native way of life, and early friars who returned to Spain selectively denounced this cultural and physical destruction. It was easy for the friars to blame the practices of Spanish civil society in Mexico, focusing on cities, mortality, and dispossessed lands, but in fact, the religious themselves inflicted perhaps the greatest destruction on Native society.

Demonstrating these destructive changes, other than the priestly assault on Native religion, is not always easy. Most of the damage inflicted on Native society was not, or still has not been, recognized for what it was or for its long-term impact and is thus poorly reflected in the surviving documentation. And this is especially true during the early decades following the Spanish conquest, for which there is a particular paucity of documentary evidence. Thus, an understanding of the impacts and implications of the earliest social changes introduced following the Conquest requires some logical extrapolation from such data as do exist. Fortunately, the necessary theoretical perspectives are amply supported by comparative evidence from other cultures and other times.



The Spaniards who entered Mexico confronted a civilization with a radically different religious and intellectual tradition from that of Europe. They also found plants, animals, and technologies unknown in the Old World, many of which they brought back to Europe, while their own equivalents made their ways inexorably across the Atlantic. Material exchanges are more easily documented—the flow of animals, minerals, fruits, and vegetables across the Atlantic in what Alfred Crosby terms the Columbian Exchange—than are social practices related to control and exploitation, such as new political structures, economic practices and concerns, and their ideological underpinnings, which were also closely tied to religion.³ In Spain, men expected to marry women of equal class who would produce legitimate heirs, though a generous dowry could compensate for social differences.⁴ And the Spaniards brought this perspective to the New World. Of less direct significance, but only slightly less evident in the documentation, were social practices that fell beyond the immediate concerns of control and exploitation.

Perhaps the single most significant factor in the colonial restructuring of Indian life in Mexico was not the imposition of Spanish religious and cultural practices but the Native demographic collapse. Scholars vigorously debate the exact numbers, but none deny that the indigenous die-off throughout the sixteenth century was massive. Although some estimates of both the initial population and the number of survivors at the end of the sixteenth century reach even greater extremes, I take the previously introduced calculations of Sanders as the reasonable low estimates and those of Cook and Borah as the reasonable high ones.⁵ These calculations place the Conquest-era population of central Mexico (from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the desert north of Mexico City) at approximately thirteen million to just over twenty-five million. Nevertheless, all agree that the Native population fell to just over a million by 1600, so the debate is over whether the Indian depopulation during the eighty years of Spanish contact in the sixteenth century amounted to 90 or 95 percent of the total. In short, the major disagreement does not revolve around depopulation, but rather over its precise catastrophic magnitude. Rather than taking a position on absolute numbers, however, my concern here is with ratios.

Some of the depopulation can be ascribed to warfare, overwork, and famines such as those that occurred in 1558, 1579, and 1587, but the vast bulk of it is attributable to disease, with three major epidemics afflicting Mexico during the sixteenth century, in 1520–1521, 1545–1548, and 1576–1581.⁶ The diseases were Old World imports to which the Indians had little immunity, and they were exacerbated by the Natives' relatively low genetic diversity, which allowed the vectors to adapt more readily and become more virulent in subsequent Native hosts.⁷ But whatever the cause, the indigenous population of Mexico suffered major depopulation in the first century of Spanish colonial rule. And while the ratio of male to female apparently remained roughly equal, albeit at lower overall numbers since relatively few Spanish women immigrated to Mexico in the early decades of its colonization, the influx of Spanish men must have increased the competition for the women who remained, both Spanish and Indian.⁸

Europeans of all social classes practiced monogamous marriage in the sixteenth century, although as Betzig notes, they mated polygynously.⁹ In this, formal European marriages deviated from the Mesoamerican norm. As with other non-Christian groups the Spaniards had encountered—notably the Muslims of Spain and North Africa—monogamy was not the standard or universal practice in Mexico. Nevertheless, the Spaniards brought monogamy with them as the legal and religious norm and sought to impose it in Mexico.¹⁰ In the simplest formulation, Europeans were monogamists and the Aztecs were polygynists, and following the conquest of Mexico, the former marriage practice displaced the latter.¹¹ But the process was not without its difficulties. Nor had it been easy in Europe, where the shift from polygyny to monogamy had been long and tortured. But there the Church sought to impose its interpretation of sanctified marital arrangements on the political elites, who resisted, and these changes were only adopted slowly, as their asserted ideological foundations (and their associated consequences, such as the elimination of divorce) were gradually inculcated into the populace. Indeed, it had not been entirely successfully implanted in Europe by the time the Spanish priests sought to introduce it to Mexico.

Monogamy as the sole permissible social form of marriage descended upon Mexico with the Spanish invaders to become the shadowy manipulator of indigenous society. Never part of the direct social engineering of the New World, monogamy slipped ashore almost unnoticed amid the more

obvious political, economic, and religious changes imposed on Aztec society. Yet it had a direct impact on the nature of Spanish exploitation and a long-lasting influence on the structure of indigenous society, as it shredded the social and political fabric.

In the decades following the Conquest, migration from Spain and the West Indies was heavily male. At the same time, miscegenation was discouraged in Mexico as a matter of policy, but since many men left their wives and families in Spain, marriages as well as illicit relations with Indian women were common.¹² So within a decade of the Conquest, Spanish policy emphasized family colonization of Mexico.¹³ And in 1530, Charles V decreed that married men could not immigrate to the New World without their wives; encomenderos who were already in Mexico had to bring their wives from Spain or face the loss of their *encomiendas*; and merchants were allowed to remain in Mexico no more than three years before they had to return to Spain for their wives or face deportation.¹⁴

Many of these immigrants were unmarried and still others were unconcerned about their absent wives back in Spain, so coupled with the general scarcity of Spanish women in Mexico, there was a predictable intermixing of the European and Indian populations. Many Indian women were taken as wives or concubines by the Spaniards, which, removing them from the Native marriage pool, caused a further imbalance in the sex ratio of the indigenous population beyond that arising from disease alone.¹⁵ But the biggest social disruption resulted from the imposition of monogamy in Mexico and the rest of the New World.



By the sixteenth century, as a public cultural ideal if not always an actual practice, monogamy had become firmly entrenched in Europe with Roman Catholics and, following the Reformation that emerged early in the century, with Protestants too as a result of their shared theological history. And because it was religiously rather than secularly inspired, although the civil laws often reflected religious doctrine, the imposition of monogamy on the Indians of Mexico was not only desirable, but absolutely necessary, if they were to convert to Christianity.¹⁶ And as the regulator and sole provider of marital rites, the Church was the prime factor in imposing monogamy in the New World.¹⁷



Would monogamy have been adopted in Mexico had the Conquest been a peaceful intermixing of cultures? It is beyond knowing now, but the Native political system was so dependent upon polygyny that it is difficult to imagine the nobility willingly giving up their power and control. Nevertheless, monogamy was eased into Mexico in the aftermath of the first major die-off of 1520–1521, which entailed the loss of approximately 40 percent of the Native population, as well as the social chaos of the Aztecs losing a war and becoming subservient to the victors. Consequently, the Aztecs could no longer impose their own cultural practices—they largely were not doing so anyway—nor could they successfully defend them.

The Church's primary method of imposing its new standards was through enculturation. Incomplete and often misunderstood though they were, these attitudes were transmitted to the Indians in texts translated into Nahuatl, such as Sahagún's *Psalmodia christiana* and Alonso de Molina's *Confessionario mayor*, which were both published in 1569 and stressed the prohibition on coveting another's wife, the value of chastity, and the sanctity of marriage.¹⁸ But religious edicts from an alien tradition are not readily transferred to a different culture, especially not in the form originally intended, and many Native practices persisted well after the Conquest, including what then became defined as bigamy and concubinage.¹⁹ Thus, in 1554 the archbishop of Mexico charged that the Native elites in Mexico practiced sodomy and also that Indian leaders married two and even three women.²⁰

While the Church denied any ability to punish transgressors directly (they merely judged them and turned the guilty over to the secular arm, which then carried out the punishment), it nevertheless relied heavily on the Inquisition. The first Inquisition began in Mexico in 1526, when the Franciscans arrived with papal authorization to conduct it in the absence of bishops.²¹ Once appointed, however, Bishop Juan de Zumárraga brought the episcopal jurisdiction to Mexico in 1528 and held at least nineteen trials involving seventy-five Indians. But his exercise of religious authority over the Indians was short lived. Following the trial of cacique don Carlos of Texcoco in 1539, who was burned at the stake for a series of heretical activities including concubinage, the king removed the bishop's authority to

execute Indians, though Zumárraga nevertheless persisted in trying them for bigamy, concubinage, and paganism.²² After 1548, the bishops again asserted jurisdiction over the Indians until 1569, when the crown created the Holy Office to reestablish the Inquisition in Mexico.²³ The Holy Office of the Inquisition was established in Mexico in 1571 but was expressly forbidden to interfere in Indian cases, a prohibition that was not entirely successful.²⁴ In any event, the Indians were subject to another office, known variously as the Office of Provisor of Natives, Tribunal of the Faith of Indians, Secular Inquisition, Vicarage of the Indians, and Natives' Court.²⁵

Idolatry is not of direct concern here, so trials for that offense are not considered, but Indians also continued to be tried for such social violations as concubinage and bigamy, both of which were considered religious as well as secular wrongs. Thus, in addition to the cacique of Texcoco, the cacique of Matlatlan was also tried for concubinage in 1539, though he faced other, more serious religious crimes as well.²⁶ And in 1538, one Indian was tried for bigamy (out of a total of nineteen cases against Indians between 1536 and 1543).²⁷

But the early colonial period was a very confusing time for households and family structures. The losses of the Conquest and the consequent population decline profoundly altered family and residential practices, aside from any direct impact caused by the imposition of Christianity. Spaniards faced major penalties for bigamy in Mexico—a stiff fine, one hundred lashes or incarceration, and being ordered to return to the legitimate spouse—and some twenty people were tried for the crime between 1536 and 1541 and more thereafter, mostly Spaniards.²⁸

Despite these religious edicts and inquisitional power, a fair amount of extramarital sexual coupling was informally tolerated, at least by the populace if not by the Church.²⁹ Moreover, this *laissez-faire* sexual activity was not the result of a frontier mentality in newly conquered Mexico. Indeed, Spanish women in both the Old World and the New had two to four times as many extramarital births as women in the rest of Western Europe at that time.³⁰ So while early colonial Mexico may have witnessed sexual excesses and openness, it was hardly distinguishable from Spain in that regard.

As in Spain, the secular law in colonial Mexico reinforced the religious, but with a series of additional laws and edicts tailored to the particular circumstances they confronted in the New World. It was, however, less the newly imposed legal strictures that effected social change among the

Indians than the simple imposition of monogamous marriage by the Spanish friars. Nevertheless, reinforcing laws were implemented, despite the prohibition on trying Indians. As of 1530, any Indian Christian convert who had more than one wife could be punished.³¹ And by 1551, no Indians—nobles or commoners, Christians or pagans—could marry more than one wife.³²

Despite these formal Spanish strictures, polygyny continued to be practiced in Mexico after the Conquest. It had always been important to the nobles, both for creating political ties and affirming elite status, and it would not be relinquished readily. But with the demise of the indigenous priesthood, the expansion of Spanish political domination, and the post-Council of Trent focus on Church control, virtually all recognized marriages had been taken over by Spanish priests by the latter half of the sixteenth century. While the previously polygynous ruling class ultimately complied with Christian monogamy, the reasons had as much to do with legal inheritance, which now had to be recognized in Spanish courts, as with religious beliefs.³³

Although the vast majority of Spaniards reaching Mexico in the early colonial period were men and the indigenous population was still sizable, there was relatively little actual intermarriage between Spaniards and Indians in the first two centuries of the colonial period: each ethnic group largely married internally, which was more reflective of status differences than legal impediments.³⁴ There was, however, considerable sexual intermixture, producing a growing mestizo class.³⁵ The marriages that did take place between Spaniards and Indians typically involved Spanish men and Indian women. This particular lack of marriages between Indian men and Spanish women is attributable to the Indians' subordinate position, as Spanish society discouraged marriage to a man from a lower class, and the relative abundance of Spanish men coupled with the general scarcity of Spanish women.³⁶

In an analysis of a rare early record of Spanish marriage patterns in 1534 Puebla, Carrasco notes that of 81 citizens, 22 were conquistadors who married Spanish women, 7 married Indians, 1 was a widower, and 6 were single.³⁷ Of the non-conquistadors, 19 had Spanish wives, 1 was a widower, 4 had wives in Spain and had sent for them, 13 had Indian wives, and 10 were single. So of the married Spaniards, 20 (30.7 percent) had Indian wives, but this figure fell to 24.1 percent among the conquistadors versus

36.1 percent among the non-conquistadors.³⁸ Nevertheless, especially after Spanish women began migrating to Mexico in larger numbers, the rates of Spanish-Indian marriages by class differed significantly, and the increasing scarcity of interethnic marriages did not translate into a lack of sexual interest or activity between the groups. Sexual contact between the ethnic groups—at first Spanish and Indians, but soon thereafter blacks and various offspring of these unions—was discouraged, but was not unheard of.³⁹

Marriages of Indian men to Spanish women did occur at the very highest social level. Among the high-status Indian men who married Spanish women were don Martín Nezahualtecolotzin, son of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl; don Hernando de Tapia, son of don Andrés de Tapia Motelchiuhtzin; don Diego Luis Moteucōma, son of don Pedro Tlacahuepantzin and grandson of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl; don Martín, who accompanied Cortés to Spain; don Diego Luis; don Antonio Cortés of Tacuba; a cacique of Tecamachalco; and don Francisco Tariacuri, don Pablo Huitzimengari, and don Constantino Huitzimengari, all three descendants of the Tarascan emperor.⁴⁰ In short, Spanish women who married Indian men overwhelmingly married into the ranks of wealthy indigenous rulers. But most Indian-Spanish marriages were between Indian women of the noble class and Spanish men.⁴¹

Both sides—Spanish and Indian—had reasons to pursue such unions. As early as the Spanish colonization of the Antilles, concubinage of Native women and intermarriage with the daughters of local Native rulers who had no male descendants were accepted practices, advocated by the priesthood as a means of securing control of the land.⁴² Indeed, acquiring lands was a major reason for Spanish marriage to noble Mexican women.⁴³



Although the outlines of the foregoing marriage patterns are clear, many of the reasons for them are little explored beyond laying them at the feet of the profound sexual imbalance among the early colonial Spaniards. Monogamy had been introduced in Mexico by the first Franciscans at least by 1529.⁴⁴ Motolinía claimed it was much earlier, dating the first Christian marriage—of the brother of the king of Tetzaco, don Hernando Pimentel, to one of his seven “companions”—to October 14, 1526, but such marriages were rare and only became common in the following three or four years.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, the impact of monogamy on indigenous society was enormous and devastating. Additionally, the Church rather arbitrarily defined the degree of kinship that constituted incest and banned it. Consequently, many of the marriages permitted under Native rules, including the most advantageous, as close marriages more tightly linked the noble power blocs, were now prohibited by the Church. So not only could noblemen not have more than one wife, which would thereby create links to other powerful noble families, but they could not marry any close kin, many of whom would have been among the most politically desirable marriage partners in the pre-Hispanic period.

Immediately after the Conquest, however, it was not always clear who were nobles, and especially who were royals, and who were entitled to lands, because there were many potential candidates for kingship as a result of the many deaths from war and the devastating epidemic. The Spaniards could not simply allow the Native system of ownership and inheritance to continue. Had they done so, many of the lands and other properties possessed by Moteuczoma Xocoyotl, being the property of the position rather than his own realty, would have then gone to the next king, Cuitlahua, and on his death to Cuauhtemoc. But the Spaniards emphasized the offspring of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl as legitimate, contrary to Native practice, and apparently did not concern themselves with which of his many wives gave birth to them, contrary to emerging Church practice. Moreover, they recognized the lands "owned" by Moteuczoma as descending to his daughters, also contrary to Native practice though in conformity with Spanish principles of descent.⁴⁶ In short, the Spaniards adopted the principles from Native laws they found most beneficial to themselves and melded them with the more advantageous ones from their own tradition, not in an attempt to create a new, equitable, and dispassionate legal system, but rather to produce the results they sought.

The royal lands of Tenochtitlan, Tlacopan, and Tetzcoco should have all been held by their respective kings, not by direct descendants of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl and especially not by his female descendants. But even had the Spaniards decided that such lands were inheritable, Cuauhtemoc and Coanacoch, at least, were young men and had few potential heirs and none who were adults or even approaching adulthood. In fact, at his death Cuauhtemoc reportedly had only a single daughter.⁴⁷ Under Spanish principles of succession, it would have been this child, as sole heir of the last

legitimate Aztec king, who owned or at least had rights to the lands of the royal office.

Cuitlahua, however, had been an adult when he reached the throne, with a number of children, among whom were a son and two daughters who were notable, but none were apparently acknowledged as owners of the kingly office lands.⁴⁸ On Cuitlahua's death, one of his wives, the daughter of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl, then married his successor, Cuauhtemoc.⁴⁹ But none of Cuitlahua's offspring inherited directly, perhaps because his reign began and ended beyond the sight of any Spaniards and thus did not play a significant role in their view of Aztec kingship. At least some of Cuitlahua's offspring were recognized as upper nobles, but it was the offspring of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl who were regarded as the rightful owners of the lands held by their father, either personally or by right of office. Moreover, this focus, which emphasized lineage in keeping with emerging Spanish practice, may have validated the elimination of any other potential heirs by other wives and ignored how the Aztecs actually determined royal descent.

Although the Spaniards were perhaps unaware of all the implications of choosing Moteuczoma Xocoyotl's children as the royal successors, insofar as the inheritance of crown lands was at issue, so doing undermined Cuauhtemoc's power. Moreover, that choice also represented a shift in support away from the Ahuitzotl lineage that Cuauhtemoc represented and back to the previous lineage of Axayacatl, which had placed Moteuczoma Xocoyotl and Cuitlahua on the throne. Thus, the choice of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl's offspring as inheritors may not have been strictly a Spanish choice and perhaps reflected the power struggle among the Native nobles following the Conquest.

In any case, the recognition of the descendants of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl as the rightful heirs was rendered moot when Cortés led an expedition to Honduras in 1525 and took with him the kings of the three principal allied cities of the Valley of Mexico: Cuauhtemoc of Tenochtitlan, Coanacoch of Tetzaco, and Tetelepanquetzal of Tlacopan. During that expedition, Cortés charged the three kings with conspiring to encourage a Native rebellion against him, apparently unconcerned with the improbability of the charge far from their own dominions, and hanged them.⁵⁰ Aside from whatever direct purposes these executions served, they also freed some high noblewomen for remarriage, including doña Isabel.

This altered inheritance pattern was also made easier by the death of

most, if not all, of Moteuczoma's sons during the Conquest, which, as non-combatants, his daughters survived. Most of these daughters were adults and ready for marriage (or remarriage, once their Native husbands were eliminated), and their most suitable potential husbands were the newly dominant Spaniards. Royal and other properties moved into the hands of these women, who then married Spanish men, and thus Native property, even when recognized by Spanish authorities as legitimately Native (whether it was or not by exclusively Native criteria), quickly passed into the hands of the Spaniards, in that generation and the ones following.⁵¹

Yet why would an Indian nobleman, especially one of the provincial nobles, choose to adopt monogamy in preference to polygyny? Aside from the loss of whatever benefits accrued to a polygynous marital arrangement itself, having only one wife meant that marriage could no longer be used to establish political ties with either subordinate or superior political allies, as had previously been the practice. It simultaneously reduced the pool of successors for any office to the offspring of the current noble, who would consequently be very few in number rather than the many that would likely be produced from numerous polygynous relationships. In adopting monogamy, the Native nobility aided in the political and social disintegration of Mexico that allowed the relatively few Spaniards to control and dominate the vast majority of the populace and simultaneously stripped themselves of the integrative benefits of elite intermarriage that would have enabled the Indians to resist. Kin ties remained important locally, but their interregional significance was greatly reduced.⁵²

At least some of the consequences of abandoning polygyny must surely have been obvious to Native nobles. Why, then, would they have adopted monogamy? The reason was that the nobles had to become Christians to be accepted into Spanish society and, even more importantly, in order to marry or to be married by Spaniards. Spaniards were now at the apex of Mexican society, and the benefits of Indian nobles merging into that segment of the colonial society and establishing strong relations with the Spanish elite were many and obvious.

For the lower nobles, however, the prospects were not as hopeful. As the Spaniards drained off Native lands and tribute, most noble houses could support fewer people, and under a monogamous regime, the lords' obligations were accordingly reduced, sending far more lower nobles into the commoner classes when they could no longer be supported by their lords' houses.

At the same time, following the disruptive population losses attending the Conquest, many Native offices were now vacant, and pretenders abounded. Many of these were recognized as caciques, a new term brought into Mexico from the West Indies by the Spaniards. *Cacique*, however, had no concrete referent in Mexico, so many nobles and not-so nobles maneuvered to be recognized in this ill-defined position, for which being a self-proclaimed Christian was a major help.⁵³

The Spaniards' goal in such marriages was apparent, but the Native nobles also gained by marrying Spaniards, especially at the upper rungs of society, as these unions ensured some protection of the Indians' status, possessions, and political positions. Moreover, as monogamy became the norm, the noble class shrank because noblemen no longer produced large numbers of offspring. But at the same time, that class stabilized, and Spanish connections were crucial to maintaining position.

Among the many marriages of Native nobles to Spaniards, the king of Tenayuca's daughter, doña Inés Tiacapan, married Rodrigo Ires, and doña Francisca Verdugo Ixtlilxóchitl, heiress of Teotihuacan and granddaughter of King Ixtlilxóchitl, married Juan Grande. And the daughters of various local rulers did so as well, including doña Agata María, daughter of the ruler of Chalco; doña Cristina of Tihuacan; doña Ana, daughter of the Tenochca king Cuitlahua; doña Magdalena de Mendoza of Tlatelolco; doña María Jacinta Cortés Chimalpopoca, granddaughter of the ruler of Tacuba (Tlacopan); and the daughters of the caciques in Teutila, Oxitipan, and Michoacan.⁵⁴

Sincerity of belief in Christianity and its requirements was not an issue, probably not even for the priests as they engaged in mass "conversions" on such a scale that the beliefs of the "converts" could only have been superficial at best and were more typically transitory if they were ever held at all. The same was true of betrothals and marriages, which were similarly performed on a mass scale.⁵⁵ But the trappings of Christianity were essential in this new emergent colonial society, and for nobles, the surest external marker was monogamy.

Only by converting to Christianity could the nobles retain their influence with the new political overlords of Mexico, and to a large extent, being a noble now meant being recognized as such by the Spaniards. From the perspective of the Indian nobles, marriage into a conquering group was a traditional way of cementing the relationship, and to this extent, such

marriages were a continuation of pre-Hispanic patterns.⁵⁶ The Indian men and women who married Spaniards came from the most-hispanicized segments of society, and intermarriage was doubtlessly seen as the one effective means available to ensure the continuation of their dominant positions in society. But always, this intermarriage meant assimilation by the Indians into Spanish culture and not the reverse.⁵⁷

Had the Spanish-Indian marriages been matters of mutual attraction, one would have expected the pattern to persist throughout the colonial period. But it did not. In the early decades of the colonial period, such marriages were one way to cement ties and gain security in the event of a rebellion at a time when the Spaniards' position was still tenuous. But by the end of the sixteenth century, the frequency of these marriages greatly diminished, as the most prominent members of the Native nobility had already assimilated into the *encomendero* class and few existed any longer as a distinct, powerful, and wealthy class.⁵⁸ Sexual liaisons continued, but within a century, marriages to or cohabitation with Indians were practiced almost exclusively by poor Spaniards.⁵⁹



During the social and demographic disruption of the early decades following the Conquest, the traditional elites struggled to maintain their positions and in doing so often converted to Christianity.⁶⁰ Such conversions, in turn, required the adoption of monogamy, yet many of the nobles who “converted” were already married, and most polygynously. In such cases, the husband disavowed all but one of this wives, typically referred to in the colonial accounts as his “first wife,” and married her in a Christian ceremony.⁶¹ What happened to these other wives is uncertain, and they may have continued life as before in all but name. That the woman chosen to be married in a Christian ceremony was actually the first woman a man had married and was thus the “first wife” was almost certainly not true. A nobleman's first union was likely to have been consummated while he was still young and before he rose in status and could attract a more politically desirable mate. Rather, it was a Spanish, and likely priestly, conceit to make it appear that the chosen woman was more legitimate in the European sense than she actually was from the Aztec perspective. In any case, as the indigenous nobleman rose in wealth, achievement, and position, the wives

he married would have been increasingly important in terms of political connections, skills, and perhaps physical desirability. And it is highly likely that one of these women would be declared the “first wife.”

We also do not know what this remarriage meant for the nobleman’s offspring. Were all but the offspring of the “first wife” instantly bastardized and, under Spanish law, disadvantaged for inheritance purposes?⁶² In all likelihood, these concepts and their attendant labels were meaningless to the Indians, even to the nobles, and would have been totally disregarded in practice at least during the early decades of the colonial period.

Introducing monogamy, and subsequently imposing it, would have been relatively easy, at least from the Spaniards’ perspective, as polygyny was only practiced by the nobility, which made up a small percentage of the population. Commoners comprised at least 95 percent of the population, and they had always been monogamous. So the nobles alone were the target of this shift. But the social and psychological cost for the nobles must have been enormous. They were being forced, within a single generation, to make a change in their social organization, with all its implications, that had taken Europe a thousand years to accomplish.

Seemingly coupled with the introduction of monogamy, surnames now began to be adopted throughout Native society, not simply among the nobility, but among the commoners as well. In most cases, this shift involved simply adding a Spanish first name and using the Native first name as the surname.⁶³ The surnames, while not a prerequisite for monogamy and bequest by descent, may have been so perceived by the Spaniards, and they were at a minimum a public acknowledgment of the new monogamous relationships and of legitimate offspring, distinguished from all others.

But however superficially the newly introduced marital notions might have been received and adopted in the early colonial years, the Native priesthood quickly withered away and with it, its rites and their importance. The Spanish priests quickly co-opted the schooling of Native boys, indoctrinating them into Christianity and instilling in them hostility toward their own Native priests.⁶⁴ It was this training of youths in Christian beliefs that turned them away from their own religious traditions, although not entirely. Many parts of Native religious life persisted, and do so even to this day, but the institutions of Native religion—the *calmecac* where priests were trained and the temples where major rituals were

celebrated, as well as the influx of tributary wealth that helped sustain them—largely came to an end within a generation, about two decades. And without the continuity of formal training, elaborate rituals were quickly reduced to folk versions or disappeared altogether.

One of the consequences of shifting from elite polygyny to universal monogamy was a greater emphasis on the patriline. Under the Aztec system, descent from the king was important for ascension to the throne, but a candidate's half brothers would share that attribute with him and would differ according to their matriline. And it was along their matriline that the Aztecs jockeyed for power. Their mothers were not important in and of themselves, but their relationships were, relationships that included allied kings, Aztec lords, and other such dignitaries.

Such matrikin still existed for noble sons in the colonial era, of course, but within a single now-monogamous family, all of the brothers had the same father and same mother, so the matrikin lost their relative importance. There might well be other half brothers, but now since they were illegitimate, their importance would be muted. The importance of the maternal link was greatly diminished, perhaps not in competition against outsiders, but certainly internally, and with it much of the political significance of women.

The adoption of monogamy depressed some prospects of women at the same time that Spanish practices enhanced others. Under Spanish law, for example, Indian women could now inherit and bequeath both realty and personalty.⁶⁵ But at the same time, the adoption of monogamy meant that commoner women lost any possibility of marrying nobles and raising the social status of their offspring. That possibility had depended on the existence of a greater demand for brides for the nobility than there were noble women to satisfy it, but with the imposition of monogamy, that demand was effectively eliminated. With the relatively balanced male-female sex ratio at birth, monogamy nearly assured that there would be one noblewoman for each nobleman, and the noblemen would continue to seek out noblewomen because these women still retained their political and social importance, though at a lesser level, as well as property. The avenue of noble marriage was now essentially closed off to commoner women, offering them few opportunities to rise above the station into which they were born.

Yet another consequence of the shift to exclusively monogamous

marriage was the change in inheritance patterns from the pre-Columbian era. Previously, realty was distributed at death to many offspring. This distribution was unlikely to be equal, but it was a real division of assets. The result was not a massive concentration of wealth in the hands of a single person or family, even though all kings and most lords would have accumulated wealth during their lives through inheritance, as well as their own efforts. Rather, at each royal or lordly death assets were dispersed among many offspring, even if only to the men. With the advent of uniform monogamy, however, royal and lordly assets were now kept within the nuclear family and were likely concentrated in the hands of the oldest son, in keeping with the usual European practice of primogeniture. Over generations, more and more of the wealth was held in the hands of proportionately fewer and fewer people, with the net result that the relatively permeable classes of Aztec times, with their partial redistribution of wealth in each generation, were gradually replaced by a far more rigid social structure, in which classes were almost entirely endogamous and wealth increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few.



Only after centuries had monogamy and its associated practices taken hold in Europe, where it ran counter to the interests of the elites. And while monogamy was similarly against the interest of the Native elites in Mexico, they had lost the political power to oppose these changes and, in fact, embracing them was virtually their only means of clinging to the vestiges of power. Thus, in just over a single generation, the Spaniards altered Aztec marriage practices, imposed surnames, and opened inheritance to both males and females, focusing on nuclear families and emphasizing stronger patrilineal lines at the expense of the matrilineal lines and concentrating wealth in the upper classes that were now endogamous, foreclosing virtually all possibility of upward mobility for commoners. At the same time, without as much competition for noble brides from other noblemen, the likelihood that nobles would fall from the ranks of the nobility was reduced even if not eliminated entirely, at least as far as being forced to marry down was concerned. In short, over the span of a single generation following the conquest of Mexico, the Spaniards imposed social changes on Mexico that had taken a millennium to emerge and be accepted in Europe.



The post-Conquest elimination of polygyny should have resulted in population growth since monogamous unions produce more offspring per woman than do polygynous ones. But the massive die-offs that persisted throughout the sixteenth century offset that increase to such a great degree that demographic benefits of monogamy did not become apparent. The chilling effect that the demise of polygyny should have had on female migration is similarly difficult to discern as waves of epidemics resulted in massive depopulation throughout Mexico that paradoxically made more and better lands available to new tenants and opened up occupations hitherto closed to outsiders, both in towns that previously sent migrants as well as those that received them. But the path to social mobility for commoner women had been effectively eliminated. Native nobles no longer sought them as wives, and nor did the Spaniards see any benefit from official unions with them.

Concluding Remarks

SOCIAL SCIENCE ANALYSIS tends to favor the abrupt over the gradual and the short term over the long in explanations, as both of the former are far more easily observed than the latter. Thus, for example, a particular change can be interpreted as the result of a battle or even an entire war more easily than it can be understood as the cumulative consequence of centuries of selective breeding by farmers. A volcanic eruption or earthquake is easier to see as a cause than gradual soil erosion, the long-term shift of wind patterns, or the current weather change brought on by decades of human activity. There is consequently a significant bias in our understanding of human changes, in part because dramatic changes are more easily seen and studied and because they often occur within a very short time span, easily within a single person's adult lifetime, and are thus noticed as important and recorded accordingly.

Some drastic social changes, such as the alteration in Aztec family form by the imposition of monogamy, may occur relatively quickly—within a single generation—but since most records were kept by the conquering Spaniards, who felt that the type of marriage to which the Aztecs shifted was normal, and because the change in this case occurred early in the colonial period before most of the Spanish chroniclers had reached the New World, it was little noted. Nor, frankly, had this change been seen in its full form and implications in Europe precisely because there it had taken place over the course of more than a millennium. But by comparing the long-term events in Europe with the compressed, single-generation changes imposed on Mexico, a far fuller picture of what happened, why, and what its significance was can be seen in both cases.

Although polygyny fostered the web of elite interconnections that helped forge the Aztec empire and then held it together over the long term, these kin ties also imparted a fatal weakness to its structure, at least in the early stages of its development when the Spaniards encountered it. Nevertheless, polygyny played a crucial role in the empire's rise. That the Aztecs were polygynists at the elite level has long been noted, being recorded in numerous historical accounts of the early colonial period, but the phenomenon has been largely passed over as though it had no further significance. This slight is likely the result of the paucity of additional information being recorded about a marital system that largely fell into disuse so early in the colonial period that its implications were not subsequently observed or at least not recognized as such. But direct accounts are only the beginning of historical and social analysis, not the sum total, and this failure to push beyond such records into the practice's implications has been a major shortcoming in Mesoamerican studies, and doubtless others elsewhere. Alternative avenues of approach remain open, among them assessing marriage patterns in terms of their biological and consequent numerical implications, which allows the further reexamination of the relatively paltry historical records addressing the issue. Thus, a more detailed examination of polygyny as practiced by the Aztecs reveals the pivotal role of women in knitting together the polity and, subsequently, the empire and their involvement in new and underappreciated political dynamics.

Polygyny as practiced by the Aztecs created a relatively flexible society, undermining the more rigid class structure that appears to have dominated many Mesoamerican city-states. Polygyny not only allowed social mobility but demanded this mobility, and not simply upward for commoners, but downward for nobles as well, with the result that the Aztecs had a flexible class system with far more movement than was usual elsewhere in Mesoamerica at that time.

Polygyny was widespread in advanced New World societies, and the dynamics of polygyny as practiced by the Aztecs suggest that once reconsidered in light of its implications both for the rise of complex political systems and for the internal dynamics of other societies, it may reveal hitherto unexamined aspects of those groups as well. Thus, for instance, the attempt to explain how political leaders rose to power has generally focused on how they managed to concentrate economic resources or how they controlled ideological factors, usually religion. Such approaches, however,

virtually demand the rise of a single gifted and charismatic individual, yet many empires, kingdoms, and statelets emerged throughout Mesoamerica. Embracing the extraordinary-individual approach requires that we believe many key gifted individuals just happened to arise in the appropriate times, places, and social positions to take advantage of their respective situations. If so, there must have been many others who were similarly gifted but born too early or too late, who were poorly positioned in society, or who emerged among groups too simple or too locked into an alternative social system to flourish. In short, the exceptional-leader theory requires the emergence of so many such persons that given the odds against their arising when and where their talents could have been maximally employed, they must not have been truly exceptional at all but merely successful among multitudes of equally gifted aspirants who achieved little or whose accomplishments have gone unrecorded.

Polygyny is not proposed as a universal explanatory panacea, but elite polygyny was far from rare. In Mesoamerica—at least where records of such matters exist, as they do in Oaxaca and among the Maya, as well as scattered throughout Mesoamerica in the colonial period—elite intermarriage between the kings and queens of different cities was commonplace, and there is generally little further analysis of the practice. But a broad cultural practice such as polygyny, and one that is in some sense “natural,” having arisen or been adopted in the vast majority of human cultures, is perhaps more easily understood as encouraging the concentration of power and the rise of more complex chiefdoms, states, and empires. Moreover, the mechanisms that give rise to polygyny are far more convincing than political, economic, and even religious explanations for the rise of complex societies, although it could easily have been adopted in conjunction with these other causes.

Such an example may, perhaps, be the enigmatic Natchez chiefdom of the American Southeast.¹ One long-standing puzzle of their society was the requirement that their leader marry women from the lower class. Rather than simply a peculiar cultural practice as recorded by European explorers, perhaps these marriages reflected the dynamics of polygyny in which there were necessarily not enough women of the leader’s class to marry so that he also married commoners. The result would be more social mobility within the society and likely greater social cohesion binding together the emerging social classes, which eased the rise of a powerful chiefdom.

Polygyny may also be relevant to understanding how social classes emerge from societies in which status is based largely on individual achievement. That shift has always seemed abrupt and disadvantageous to the bulk of society, but large-scale elite polygyny may offer an explanation for how it occurs. In polygynous society, class exogamy is inevitable and virtually guarantees that the lower rungs of society can and will merge with the upper through intermarriage, whether or not it is culturally mandated. Therefore, everyone has a potential stake in such a system, ensuring a tighter integration of society as classes emerge, in contrast to the growth of a more rigid class system caused by some other external mechanism. In fact, polygynously bound classes may be a more plausible early step in the development of social complexity than the abrupt emergence of rigid classes with their differential control of resources.

The implications of polygyny may usefully illuminate other examples, as well. For example, Arlen Chase suggests that many Classic Maya cities had a growing middle class at the time of their demise.² The juxtaposition of a growing middle class with a societal collapse conflicts with modern understandings of the stability and instability of societies.³ Today, a growing middle class is generally seen as desirable, both as a more dynamic part of any society than the traditional elites and as a source of greater social stability. But perhaps what Chase observed was not the expansion of a middle class from the lower classes, which is commonly assumed to be the direction of growth, but rather the decline of a portion of the noble class that was expanding as a result of elite polygyny faster than the commoners could support it. That is, if those societies lacked a mechanism that permitted greater social mobility, both upward and downward, elite polygyny among the Maya would have produced a growing body of offspring who could not be economically absorbed into their natal class. Thus, the growing middle class that Chase perceived in his data might not have been comprised of successful commoners on their way up, but of erstwhile nobles on their way down. The result would thus be an increasing number of nobles and their dependents, while the lower classes remained relatively fixed and increasingly unable to sustain the burdens placed upon them. The archaeological record may accurately reflect a burgeoning middle class, but it would have resulted from elite polygyny, which may well have contributed to the instability and demise of Maya cities generally, especially if the lower classes were under some additional external pressures.

It is also tempting to expand the Aztec example to other earlier Mexican empires, offering as it does an effective mechanism for linking social classes and fostering a more dynamic society. Some such empires were apparently the creations of remarkable individuals, such as 8 Deer in eleventh-century Oaxaca or Tezozomoc, who founded the Tepanec empire in the fourteenth-century Valley of Mexico. But these empires apparently lacked a more institutionalized structure and did not long outlast their founders, reflecting the shortcomings of attributing the rise of greater societal complexity to gifted individuals. Such short dynastic reigns were overcome in the Aztec system by the rule not exclusively of kings, but of kingly cohorts, so that even when one ruler died, the bulk of the political cadre remained, providing stability for the next ruler chosen from their ranks. Moreover, such stability remained even during a cohort shift, as the new dominant cohort shared many, if not most, of the same kin connections as the earlier cohort. And some earlier empires, such as Teotihuacan and perhaps the Toltecs, did persist, and they left pictorial and sculptural evidence that suggests a more open and stable political system that could persist over generations, like that of the Aztecs. But does any of this have implications for other than archaic societies?

It is often stated, on the one hand, that modern society with its nuclear families is the result of industrialization and the consequent dependence on wage labor rather than on family farms, so that extended families are no longer necessary and are, in fact, economic liabilities.⁴ At the same time, it is often considered that the rapid accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few solidified, if not caused, the formation of more rigid social classes.

Whatever the contributions of these factors, the role of marriage practices in the formation and reformation of societies merits examination. Although great social distinctions existed in early medieval Europe, the prevailing polygynous unions of the elites worked against the formation of rigid classes and the massive concentration of wealth in the hands of a few families. Elite men married multiple women, which necessarily included those of all classes, and at a patriarch's death, accumulated wealth was divided, albeit not always equally, and dispersed among many sons. The rise of more rigid classes was thus not the result of state societies or industrialization and wage labor, but was rather the result of the rise of monogamy, which fostered their development and the concentration of wealth in lineal families.

Only after monogamy was adopted was it feasible, even necessary, to become class endogamous. Elite men could marry only one wife, so the best choices were elite women, who brought with them ties to their own influential natal families and, in many cases, wealth that would become concentrated in the marital family.⁵ And doing so was feasible for virtually all nobles, provided they married monogamously, since as many noblewomen were born as noblemen.

Thus, the rise of monogamy severed the commoner classes from the nobles in a way and to a degree never experienced before. Upward mobility by marriage was now virtually impossible for commoners. Moreover, impartible inheritance became the norm, retaining family property in the linear family and, typically, in the hands of a primary heir, who also inherited any noble title. Family wealth was increasingly concentrated in a single nuclear family whose head inherited from his father and bequeathed it all to a single son.⁶

While the industrial revolution later shook the foundations of Western society by creating a new basis of wealth and new elites, industrialization did not account for the rise and dominance of nuclear families and the modern class system in which wealth is concentrated in relatively few families. Industrialization did create new wealth holders, but these were absorbed into the existing social system and, similar to the traditional nobility, married endogamously and passed their wealth patrilineally.

The very foundation of modern class society long predates industrialization and was instead the gift of Church-imposed monogamy, fully emerging in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.⁷ Historically, it would seem that monogamy in complex societies has led to far more rigid class structures than has polygyny, as well as a far greater concentration of wealth in the hands of the elite.

Such patterns of inherited wealth also create offspring with feelings of entitlement that are often unwarranted by intelligence or ability. Pushed to an extreme, in modern American society, this expectation has produced such deviant examples as the Menendez brothers in Los Angeles, who murdered their parents to get ahold of their considerable wealth and then, after conviction and while being sentenced for their crime, sought leniency because they had become orphans. Maxtlatl's fratricide undermines the idea that polygynous societies with less fixed notions of inheritance would eliminate such behavior. But as royal offspring are only heirs expectant, and

not sole heirs at that, the result may have been a greater ethic of having to accomplish in order to succeed.

To reverse the increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people, perhaps a reversion to polygyny should be considered, at least for the super-rich, if I may be permitted a modest proposal. If, for instance, each multimillionaire of the late nineteenth century had been allowed (or perhaps even required to have) an additional spouse per some specified amount of wealth, say a million dollars at that time, instead of concentrating that wealth in a single-descendant family and creating the family dynasties whose descendants meritlessly dominate so much of economic and political life today, at their death the wealth would be divided among the offspring of the various spouses and more effectively redistributed through society. Such a system would mean that Andrew Carnegie, whose wealth was estimated to be \$400 million, would have wives equaling his millions, with the result that his (presumably) many offspring would all share, giving the world four hundred relatively wealthy but not dominating heirs, with the eventual result that the Carnegie fortune would have been redistributed back into society over several generations.

In any case, the impact and implications of polygyny have been largely ignored. It is perhaps time that that should change.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

1. The Crónica X sources are three histories (Durán, Crónica Mexicana, and Códice Ramírez) that are so similar they are presumed to have been copied, in whole or in part, from one earlier source (X) that is now lost. See Barlow, “La Crónica X.”
2. See Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 321–24n16, 325–26n27.
3. Most pre-Columbian cultures of Mesoamerica are known largely or exclusively through archaeology, and the Aztecs are often lumped with these cultures. Although the remains of the Aztec capital hold promise for future archaeology, they lie beneath modern-day Mexico City and are largely undisturbed. And although the Aztecs are by far the best known of the Mesoamerican cultures, they are known historically, not archaeologically. Thus, the various archaeological approaches available for other and earlier cultures are applicable to Tenochtitlan only by analogy with other archaeologically accessible Valley of Mexico cities. Such analogies bring their own difficulties not only because most of these other towns were less sophisticated than the Aztec capital, but also because they predate it significantly so that their layouts, houses, and other archaeologically accessible remains may not reflect those of the later-constructed Tenochtitlan. Consequently, I do not take an archaeological approach to Tenochtitlan because the data are lacking and the historical data offer vastly greater detail.
4. Códice Aubin; “Códice Boturini.”
5. Nutini, “Introduction,” 4–8.
6. Hassig, *Trade*, 127–44.

CHAPTER 2

1. Carrasco, “Social Organization,” 351–54.
2. Ibid., 351–52; Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 103.
3. Carrasco, “Social Organization,” 352.
4. Ibid.; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:112; Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 104.
5. Carrasco, “Social Organization,” 352; Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 105.
6. Carrasco, “Social Organization,” 353; Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 105.

7. Carrasco, "Social Organization," 354; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:112–13; Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 111.
8. Carrasco, "Social Organization," 354.
9. Ibid., 355.
10. Ibid., 364–65; Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 106–8.
11. Carrasco, "Social Organization," 365–66.
12. Ibid., 354–55; Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 105–6, 109–10.
13. Carrasco, "Social Organization," 354; Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 109–10.
14. Carrasco, "Social Organization," 355.
15. Hicks, "Mayeques."
16. Carrasco, "Social Organization," 356.
17. Ibid.
18. See, for example, Carrasco, "Social Organization"; Hicks, "The Middle Class."
19. Becker, *A Treatise*, 44.
20. Carrasco, "Indian-Spanish Marriages," 89.
21. Ibid.
22. Anderson, "Aztec Wives," 80; Kellogg, "From Parallel," 132; Sahagún, *General History*, 1981, 40.
23. Ingoldsby, "Marital Structure," 118; Murdock, *Social Structure*, 24–25; Zeitlin, *Polygamy*, 12–14.
24. Herlihy, "Biology," 575; Ingoldsby, "Marital Structure," 118; Van den Berghe, *Human Family Systems*, 48; Zeitlin, *Polygamy*, 11–12.
25. Clignet, *Many Wives*, 17; Ingoldsby, "Marital Structure," 118; Van den Berghe, *Human Family Systems*, 48; Zeitlin, *Polygamy*, 9–11.
26. Van den Berghe, *Human Family Systems*, 48.
27. Ingoldsby, "Marital Structure," 118.
28. Dickemann, "Female Infanticide," 324, 364.
29. Ingoldsby, "Marital Structure," 123.
30. Goody, *The Oriental*, 49.
31. Thatcher, "Marriages," 46.
32. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:26.
33. Ibid., 1:56–57.
34. Alonso de Zorita, also writing in the sixteenth century, differs and says divorces were rare. But the lack of figures for the preconquest era makes it difficult to resolve this difference of opinion. See Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 125.
35. Sahagún, *The War*, 59.
36. Sahagún, *General History*, 1951, 39–41. See also Sahagún, *General History*, 1969, 127–33, for a more detailed account.
37. Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 139. But see the unlikely claim in colonial Chicolapa that the pre-Conquest marriage age was twenty-five for women and thirty for men. Acuña, *Relaciones*, 6:174.
38. Encinas, *Cedulario indiano*, 4:322–23; *Recopilación*, 2:208–9 (lib. 6, tit. 5, ley 7).
39. *Recopilación*, 2:188 (lib. 6, tit. 1, ley 3).

40. Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana*, 1:215.
41. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:49.
42. Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 125.

CHAPTER 3

1. But see Coast's ("An Evaluation") critique of the use of ethnographies for demographic purposes.
2. Goody, *The Oriental*, 372; Murdock, *Social Structure*, 27; Prothro and Diab, *Changing Family Patterns*, 182–83.
3. Muhsam, "Fertility," 4.
4. Prothro and Diab, *Changing Family Patterns*, 182.
5. Dickemann, "Female Infanticide," 324.
6. Ibid., 364.
7. Ingoldsby, "Marital Structure," 118.
8. Chamie, "Polygyny among Arabs," 56; Foster, *Women*, 188–89; Goody, *The Oriental*, 379.
9. Betzig, *Despotism*, 34; Telford, "Covariates," 19, 26.
10. Alvarez-Pereyre and Heymann, "The Desire," 182; Glassner, "From Sumer," 109, 123–24; Sahagún, *General History*, 1970, 44.
11. Ember, "Warfare," 199–202.
12. Chagnon, "Mate Competition," 104–5; Hern, "Polygyny," 53, 55.
13. Muhsam, "Fertility," 16.
14. Goody, *The Oriental*, 350.
15. Muhsam, "Fertility," 5–6.
16. Ibid., 6.
17. Chagnon, "Is Reproductive Success," 378; Irons, "Natural Selection," 32.
18. Becker, *A Treatise*, 81–82, 89; Chagnon, "Is Reproductive Success," 194–95; Clignet, *Many Wives*, 22; Herlihy, "Biology," 575; Ingoldsby, "Marital Structure," 120; Irons, "Natural Selection," 32; Jacoby, "The Economics," 939.
19. Jacoby, "The Economics," 939–43.
20. McCafferty and McCafferty, "Powerful Women," 48.
21. Betzig, *Despotism*, 83.
22. Ibid., 84.
23. Chagnon, "Mate Competition," 104–5; Herlihy, "Biology," 576.
24. Betzig, *Despotism*, 85; Jacoby, "The Economics," 942.
25. Herlihy, "Biology," 574; Ingoldsby, "Marital Structure," 120–21.
26. Betzig, *Despotism*, 2–9, 90–91; Herlihy, "Biology," 572.
27. Betzig, *Despotism*, 58–59.
28. Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras completas*, 2:153; Berdan, *The Aztecs*, 68; Bernand and Gruzinski, "Children," 164.
29. Acuña, *Relaciones*, 5:385; Berdan, *The Aztecs*, 68; Motolinía, *Memoriales*, 325–26.

CHAPTER 4

1. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 82.
2. *Ibid.*, 182.
3. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:52.
4. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 181; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:59–60; Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 139.
5. Alvarado Tezozómoc, “Código Ramírez,” 36; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:56; Vázquez de Espinosa, *Description*, 142.
6. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:56.
7. *Ibid.*, 2:57.
8. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 91, 190, 196; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:56.
9. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 82–83, 183; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:52, 59–60.
10. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:62; Vázquez de Espinosa, *Description*, 142.
11. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 183; Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras completas*, 1:409.
12. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:56.
13. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 90–91; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:63–66; Alvarado Tezozómoc, “Código Ramírez,” 40; Alvarado Tezozómoc, *Crónica mexicáyotl*, 237, 239.
14. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:65.
15. Vázquez de Espinosa, *Description*, 142; Nazareo, “Carta,” 122.
16. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 89–90.
17. *Ibid.*, 90.
18. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:66.
19. Vázquez de Espinosa, *Description*, 142.
20. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:70.
21. Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras completas*, 1:409, 2:37–38.
22. *Ibid.*, 1:322; 2:25; Nazareo, “Carta,” 123.
23. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 91, 189.
24. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:71; Vázquez de Espinosa, *Description*, 142.
25. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 90, 190.
26. *Ibid.*, 190.
27. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:70–71.
28. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 91, 189.
29. Burling, *The Passage*.
30. Goody, “Introduction,” 34.
31. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 91, 189.
32. Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 103.
33. Carrasco, “Royal Marriages,” 60.
34. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 91, 190, 196.

35. Goody, "Introduction," 34.
36. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:80, 82, 99.
37. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 91, 190, 197.
38. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:73–74.
39. Ibid., 2:122.
40. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 196–97.
41. *Códice Chimalpopoca*, 89.
42. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:125.
43. See Gregory of Tours (*The History*, 167) for an example of murderous maternal plotting on behalf of a son in early medieval France.
44. Carrasco, "Royal Marriages."
45. For a Tswana example, see Kuper, "Preferential Marriage," 127–31.
46. For a more extensive discussion of this calendrical change and imposition, see Hassig, *Time*.
47. Carrasco, "Royal Marriages."
48. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:236–37.
49. Murdock, *Social Structure*, 26.
50. Goody, *The Development*, 76.
51. Dickemann, "Female Infanticide," 336.
52. Van den Berghe, *Human Family Systems*, 168.
53. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:211–14.
54. Ibid., 2:215–17.
55. Smith, *National Identity*, 12–13.
56. Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras completas*, 2:129.
57. Alvarado Tezozómoc, "Códice Ramírez," 66–67; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:250, 314.
58. Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras completas*, 2:129; Alvarado Tezozómoc, *Crónica mexicana*, 114; Berdan and Anawalt, *The Codex Mendoza*, 3:9v; Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 97, 103; Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario*, 10:121–22; Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana*, 1:238; Vázquez de Espinosa, *Description*, 143.
59. Carrasco, "Social Organization," 357.
60. Ibid., 354; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:113–14.
61. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:65–66.
62. Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana*, 1:252.
63. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 106, 110, 215, 219; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:295, 311; Vázquez de Espinosa, *Description*, 143.
64. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:313–14.
65. Ibid., 2:389, 391.
66. *Códice Chimalpopoca*, 35, 44–45; Muñoz Camargo, "Descripción," 271–75.
67. "Anales México-Azcapotzalco," 49.
68. Alvarado Tezozómoc, *Crónica mexicana*, 104; "Anales México-Azcapotzalco," 50; Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 190; Durán, *Historia de las*

- Indias*, 2:71–72; García Icazbalceta, *Nueva colección*, 3:298; Herrera y Tordesilla, *Historia general*, 6:207; Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana*, 1:167–77.
69. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:311; Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana*, 1:255.
 70. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:391; Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras completas*, 2:177.
 71. Acosta, *Obras*, 241; Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras completas*, 2:229; Alvarado Tezozómoc, *Crónica mexicáyotl*, 149; *Códice Aubin*, 82, 86; Cortés, *Cartas*, 93; Díaz del Castillo, *Historia*, 1:387–91; López de Gómara, *Historia*, 2:198–99; Muñoz Camargo, *Historia*, 217; Muñoz Camargo, “Descripción,” 252; Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia*, 4:62–63.
 72. Goody, “Introduction,” 35.
 73. Compare the similar, though non-noble, practice in medieval Korea in Lee and Park, “Marriage.”
 74. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 120, 228; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:399; Vásquez de Espinosa, *Description*, 143.
 75. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:403, 406–7.
 76. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 235.
 77. Ibid; Vásquez de Espinosa, *Description*, 145.
 78. Carrasco, “Royal Marriages,” 62; Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 235; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:549; Vásquez de Espinosa, *Description*, 145.
 79. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 189; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:56.

CHAPTER 5

1. Alexander et al., “Sexual Dimorphism,” 402.
2. Zerjal et al., “The Genetic Legacy.”
3. For Tenochtitlan, see Calnek, “The Internal Structure of Tenochtitlan,” 288; Calnek, “The Internal Structure of Cities,” 316; accepted by Sanders, Parsons, and Santley, *The Basin*, 154. Hardoy (*Pre-Columbian Cities*, 154–55) estimates a population for Tenochtitlan of three hundred thousand, based on a recorded sixty thousand houses in the city. For central Mexico, see Calnek, “The Internal Structure of Tenochtitlan,” 288; Calnek, “The Internal Structure of Cities,” 316; Castillo Farreras, “Camino,” 181–83; Cook and Borah, *Essays*, 80–82; Hardoy, *Pre-Columbian Cities*, 154–55; Sanders, “The Population,” 1970, 449; Sanders, “The Population,” 1976, 291; Sanders, Parsons, and Santley, *The Basin*, 162, 184.
4. For example, Chase and Chase, *Mesoamerican Elites*, 1992; Dahrendorf, *Class*, 238; Hicks, “The Middle Class,” 409, 422–23; Nutini, *The Wages*, 3–12; Sjoberg, *The Preindustrial City*, 1960.
5. Crone, *Pre-industrial Societies*, 15–16; Sjoberg, *The Preindustrial City*, 110. Warren’s calculation of the nobility from the *Matrícula de Huexotzinco* (1974) supports the higher figure for indigenous nobility in that central Mexican town

- with an estimated residential population of approximately thirty thousand. See Warren, "Some Demographic Considerations," 255–56, 259–60.
6. Hicks, "The Middle Class," 409–11, 419. Dewald (*The European Nobility*, 1) similarly estimates the medieval European nobility at 1 to 2 percent of the total population, although it subsequently varied enormously in Europe, ranging as high as 16 percent in some areas (24–25).
 7. Sahagún (*General History*, 1961, 8, 37) reported concubinage but in keeping with the Church's position, uniformly disparaged it, which was almost certainly not the case pre-Hispanically.
 8. Carrasco, "Social Organization," 369. Compare late medieval China, where concubinage offered women the very real prospect of upward social mobility. See Hua, "The Market."
 9. Sahagún, *The War*, 59.
 10. Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras completas*, 2:153.
 11. Telford, "Fertility," 64.
 12. Bean and Mineau, "The Polygyny-Fertility Hypothesis," 68; Embry, *Mormon*, 35; Marcy, "Factors," 309–11.
 13. Bean and Mineau, "The Polygyny-Fertility Hypothesis," 72, 75; Bean, Mineau, and Anderton, *Fertility Change*, 35, 37; Muhsam, "Fertility," 6.
 14. Bean and Mineau, "The Polygyny-Fertility Hypothesis," 75; Muhsam, "Fertility," 13. In a distinctly minority position, Nag (*Factors*, 94) argues that polygyny does not reduce fertility.
 15. Bean and Mineau, "The Polygyny-Fertility Hypothesis," 67, 72, 80; Bean, Mineau, and Anderton, *Fertility Change*, 116; Dorjahn, "Fertility," 838, 847; Dorjahn, "The Factor," 109; Goody, *The Oriental*, 140; Hern, "Polygyny," 54; Muhsam, "Fertility," 12; Telford, "Fertility," 64; Whiting, "The Effect," 439. See Embry, *Mormon*, 37, for a nineteenth-century Mormon example and Muhsam, "Fertility," 6, for a Bedouin case.
 16. Clignet, *Many Wives*, 29; Hern, "Polygyny," 60–61; Ivans, "Notes," 236. See, for example, Bean, Mineau, and Anderton 1990:35, 37; Muhsam 1956:6, 13.
 17. Clignet, *Many Wives*, 29; Dorjahn, "Fertility," 838; Nag, *Factors*, 94; Whiting, "The Effect," 439. Smith and Kunz ("Polygyny," 475) deny that this pattern is found among nineteenth-century Mormons, based on their analysis of historical birth accounts, but this position has little support in the literature.
 18. Dorjahn, "Fertility," 838.
 19. Chamie, "Polygyny," 60; Dorjahn, "Fertility," 844; Fox, *Kinship*, 220; Goody, *The Oriental*, 48; Muhsam, "Fertility," 16; Murdock, *Social Structure*, 27; Nag, *Factors*, 95; Van den Berghe, *Human Family Systems*, 50.
 20. Dorjahn, "Fertility," 857.
 21. Mulder, "On Polygyny," 625.
 22. Whiting, "The Effect," 435–36.
 23. *Ibid.*, 440–41.

24. Bean and Mineau, "The Polygyny-Fertility Hypothesis," 76; Hern, "Polygyny," 60. Contrary to the vast majority of polygynous societies, nineteenth-century polygynous Mormons had shorter birth intervals than monogamists after the first birth. See Smith and Kunz, "Polygyny," 475.
25. Chagnon, "Mate Competition," 104–5.
26. Hern, "Polygyny," 53.
27. Clignet, *Many Wives*, 29; Dorjahn, "Fertility," 85; Hern, "Polygyny," 53; Whiting, "The Effect," 439.
28. Clignet, *Many Wives*, 19; Dorjahn, "Fertility," 845; Goody, *The Oriental*, 14; Kurland, "Paternity," 170; Mulder, "On Polygyny," 625; Murdock, *Social Structure*, 29, 31; Thatcher, "Marriages," 47; Van den Berghe, *Human Family Systems*, 49.
29. Betzig, *Despotism*, 79, 84.
30. Mulder, "On Polygyny," 625.
31. Stern and McClintock, "Regulation," 177.
32. Dorjahn, "Fertility," 838; Muhsam, "Fertility," 5; Mulder, "On Polygyny," 625.
33. Betzig, *Despotism*, 8, interprets such situations sociobiologically and argues that men try to monopolize women, even if they cannot impregnate them, to keep them away from other men. And while it is conceivable that this strategy was used by kings to reduce the number of women available to other men and produce more offspring of their own to place in positions of power, it seems unlikely in light of Aztec succession practices.
34. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:232.
35. Dorjahn, "Fertility," 844; Van den Berghe, *Human Family Systems*, 50.
36. Chamie, "Polygyny," 60.
37. Goody, *The Oriental*, 48.
38. Dorjahn, "Fertility," 857; Goody, *The Development*, 12–13.
39. Van den Berghe, *Human Family Systems*, 168.

CHAPTER 6

1. Caso, "Land Tenure."
2. See Hassig, *Trade*.
3. Carrasco, "Social Organization," 356–59; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:67–68; Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 90–91, III.
4. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:48; Sahagún, *General History*, 1952, 49, 59–61.
5. Carrasco, "Social Organization," 359.
6. *Ibid.*, 358–59.
7. Pareto, *The Rise*, 74–76, 80; Pareto, *Compendium*, 278–79, 381.
8. Pareto, *The Rise*, 36.
9. Hicks, "The Middle Class," 411.
10. Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 90–91, III.

11. Naquin, *Peking*, 389–90; see also Rawski, *The Last Emperors*, 64.
12. Anawalt, *Indian Clothing*, 27.
13. Harvey, “Some Aspects,” 89–90.
14. Regarding scribes, see Boone, *Stories*, 24.
15. Harvey, “Some Aspects,” 89.
16. One of Itzcoatl’s daughters married a commoner from Atotonilco, and by virtue of that marriage, he became lord of that town and began his own ruling lineage. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 197.
17. Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 104–5.
18. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:49; Sahagún, *General History*, 1952, 49.
19. In Tenochtitlan, commoner men married around the age of twenty, whereas in the countryside they apparently married around the age of fourteen. The first figure, however, refers to Tenochtitlan’s pre-Conquest practice, whereas the second figure reflects rural practice during colonial sixteenth-century Mexico, which may not accurately reflect pre-Conquest customs.
20. Dickemann, “Female Infanticide,” 324; Whiting, “The Effect,” 440; Ingoldsby, “Marital Structure,” 123; Nag, *Factors*, 96; Telford, “Covariates,” 19, 26–28.
21. Sahagún, *General History*, 1959, 80–83.
22. Brumfiel, “Specialization”; Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario*, 4:169–70; see also Hasig, *Trade*, 127–44.
23. Fan and Huang, “Waves,” 241.

CHAPTER 7

1. Caso, “Land Tenure,” 868–69.
2. *Ibid.*, 870–73.
3. Chance, “The Noble House”; Hicks, “Land.”
4. Brennan, James, and Morrill, “Inheritance,” 289–90.
5. Regt, “Inheritance,” 146.
6. *Ibid.*, 146–47.
7. See also Hartung, “Polygyny”; and Roth, *Culture*, 70–78.
8. Dickemann, “Female Infanticide,” 358; Einhard and Notker the Stammerer, *Two Lives*, 87–90.

CHAPTER 8

1. See, for example, Sahagún, *General History*, 1961, 12–13.
2. *Ibid.*, 3, 13, 94.
3. *Ibid.*, 89.
4. *Ibid.*, 55–56.
5. *Ibid.*, 55–56, 94.
6. *Ibid.*, 3; Sahagún, *General History*, 1979, 4:25, 95.

7. Sahagún, *General History*, 1981, 56, 98, 109, 118, 169.
8. Anderson, "Aztec Wives," 83–84.
9. Muhsam, "Fertility," 3; Nag, "Factors," 94; Smith and Kunz, "Polygyny," 465; Whiting, "The Effect," 439.
10. Bean and Mineau, "The Polygyny-Fertility Hypothesis," 68; Dorjahn, "Fertility," 111; Muhsam, "Fertility," 16; Nag, "Factors," 95. For a Chinese example, see Telford, "Covariates," 19.
11. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:36, 2:213.
12. Ibid., 1:36; Sahagún, *General History*, 1954, 42–43; Sahagún, *General History*, 1961, 56; Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 130, 257; Pomar, *Relación*, 32–33; Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana*, 1:166, 2:378–80.
13. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:36; Acuña, *Relaciones*, 5:190, 6:301, 10:36–37.
14. Offner, *Law*, 54–55; Acuña, *Relaciones*, 6:311.
15. Quiñones Keber, *Codex*, fol. 17r; Offner, *Law*, 265, leaf 3, column 3, row 2.
16. Sahagún, *General History*, 1969; Anderson, "Aztec Wives," 80.
17. Bianquis, "The Family," 615; Forgeau, "The Survival," 144–45; Glassner, "From Sumer," 113; Rousselle, "The Family," 293.
18. Offner, *Law*, 51.
19. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 216; Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 131; Offner, *Law*, 237; Motolinía, *Memoriales*, 358–59.
20. Sahagún, *General Things*, 42–43, 257.
21. Offner, *Law*, 257; Veytia, *Historia*, 2:332.
22. Offner, *Law*, 265.
23. Sahagún, *Primeros memoriales*, 1997, 163, 164, 166.
24. Ibid., 174.
25. Sahagún, *General History*, 1970, 118.
26. Sahagún, *Códice Florentino*, 8:42.
27. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:156–57.
28. Offner, *Law*, 259; Motolinía, *Memoriales*, 314–15.
29. Offner, *Law*, 258–60; Barlow, "El Códice Azcatitlán," 31, 36.
30. Offner, *Law*, 265.
31. Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 1:83.
32. Offner, *Law*, 260; Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana*, 2:378–79; Estas son las leyes," 311.
33. Zorita, *Breve y sumaria relación*, 130–31, 257.
34. Pomar, *Relación*, 32–33.
35. Motolinía, *Memoriales*, 310.
36. Compare Ebrey's explanations for harems in China. Ebrey, *Women*, 178–80.

CHAPTER 9

1. Cortés, *Cartas*, 77.
2. Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 39–48; Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 240–41.

CHAPTER 10

1. Aguilar, *Relación*, 67; Cortés, *Cartas*, 18–19; Díaz del Castillo, *Historia*, 1:119–21; López de Gómara, *Historia*, 2:47, 49; Martyr d'Anghera, *De Orbe Novo*, 2:35; Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia*, 4:9.
2. Díaz del Castillo, *Historia*, 1:154–55, 157–59; Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras completas*, 2:205; López de Gómara, *Historia*, 2:78–79.
3. Díaz del Castillo, *Historia*, 1:218, 221–22; López de Gómara, *Historia*, 2:112; Muñoz Camargo, *Historia*, 191; Muñoz Camargo, “*Descripción*,” 237–38.
4. Cervantes de Salazar, *Crónica*, 262; Díaz del Castillo, *Historia*, 1:245–46; Sahagún, *Conquest*, 58; Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana*, 2:139.
5. Aguilar, *Relación*, 88; Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, *Relaciones*, 236; Cortés, *Cartas*, 93; Díaz del Castillo, *Historia*, 1:390–91; Durán, *Historia de las Indias*, 2:551; Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras completas*, 1:454; López de Gómara, *Historia*, 2:199; Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 65–66; Sahagún, *Conquest*, 84–85.
6. Aguilar, *Relación*, 95; Cortés, *Cartas*, 123; Díaz del Castillo, *Historia*, 1:440–41; Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras completas*, 1:455, 2:241–42; López de Gómara, *Historia*, 2:229; Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia*, 4:89.
7. But see Hassig, “How Fighting Ended.”

CHAPTER 11

1. Kuefier, “The Marriage Revolution.”
2. Ekelund et al., *Sacred Trust*, 85–107.
3. Herlihy, “Biology,” 7.
4. Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees*, 21, 152.
5. *Ibid.*, 114.
6. *Ibid.*, 153.
7. *Ibid.*, 180, 192, 200; Toubert, “The Carolingian Moment,” 401.
8. Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees*, 200–201.
9. Lea, *An Historical Sketch*, 188–89, 203–4, 272, 345, 386–88; Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees*, 208.
10. Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees*, 269.
11. *Ibid.*, 344–45.
12. *Ibid.*, 473.
13. *Ibid.*, 496.

14. Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, 3.
15. "Leyes de Toro."
16. Alfonso el Sabio, *Las Siete Partidas*, 1:132 (pt. I, tit. IV, ley LXXII), 3:11–12 (pt. IV, tit. II, ley I); Schroeder, *The Canons*, 180–81. Contra Boyer (*Lives*, 31), marriage was considered a sacrament centuries before the Council of Trent, although that council reemphasized it.
17. Brundage, *Law*, 225; Herlihy, "The Family," 6.
18. Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees*, 181, 207.
19. *Ibid.*, 474.
20. Alfonso el Sabio, *Las Siete Partidas*, 1:220 (pt. I, tit. V, ley XXXV).
21. *Ibid.*, 1:280–83 (pt. I, tit. VI, leyes XLI, XLII, XLIII, and XLIV).
22. *Ibid.*, 3:16 (pt. IV, tit. II, ley VIII), 3:22 (pt. IV, tit. II, ley XIX), 3:648 (pt. VII, tit. XVII, ley I); "Leyes de Toro," 1:727 (leyes LXXX, LXXXI), 1:272 (ley LXXXI).
23. Alfonso el Sabio, *Las Siete Partidas*, 3:85 (pt. IV, tit. XIV).
24. *Ibid.*, 3:85–86 (pt. IV, tit. XIV, leyes I and II).
25. *Ibid.*, 3:86–87 (pt. IV, tit. XIV, ley III).
26. "Leyes de Toro," 1:722 (leyes IX and X); Nygren, "Interpreting Legitimacy."
27. Alfonso el Sabio, *Las Siete Partidas*, 3:89 (pt. IV, tit. XV, ley IV).
28. Bresc, "Europe," 433–34.
29. *Ibid.*, 435, 454.
30. Lea, *An Historical Sketch*, 436, 453.
31. Schroeder, *The Canons*, 180–81.
32. *Ibid.*, 181–82.
33. *Ibid.*, 182, 246.
34. Boyer, *Lives*, 32; Schroeder, *The Canons*, 188.
35. Schroeder, *The Canons*, 189.
36. Schroeder, *The Catechism*, 3–5.
37. *Ibid.*, 338–55, 432–35, 467–73.
38. Kamen, *Inquisition*, 53, 206; Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, 74–75, 80.
39. Kamen, *Inquisition*, 58, 206; Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, 201, 266.
40. Kamen, *Inquisition*, 183, 185; Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, 266.
41. Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, 265.
42. Donahue, "The Cannon Law," 145.
43. Kamen, *Inquisition*, 207; Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, 267.
44. Goody, *The Development*. But see Gies and Gies's (*Marriage*, 83–84) critique.
45. Herlihy ("Biology," 579–80), however, suggests that the decline of slavery was a confounding factor.
46. Becker, *A Treatise*, 81.
47. Goody, *The Development*, 211–12.
48. Herlihy, "Church Property," 86–88.
49. Einhard and Notker the Stammerer, *Two Lives*, 73; Gies and Gies, *Marriage*, 87–88.

50. Lynch, *The Medieval Church*, 291.
51. Stone, *The Family*, 31.
52. Gilchrist, *The Church*, 5.
53. Lea, *An Historical Sketch*, 65.
54. Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, 86.
55. Ibid., 87–88, 137.
56. Dillard, *Daughters*, 26; Van Kleffens, *Hispanic Law*, 262–64.
57. Fassler, “Mary’s Nativity”; McGuire, “The Symbol”; Wareham, “The Transformation,” 375–76, 397.
58. The stucco Tree of Jesse on the ceiling of the colonial cathedral in Oaxaca is a Mexican example.
59. Although representations of the Tree of Jesse show Mary as the descendent of Jesse, the Bible actually traces a relationship from Jesse to Joseph and once at Joseph, jumps to Mary but does not actually directly trace the descent of Mary herself. Matthew 1:1–16 lists the descent of Jesus, beginning with Abraham, through fourteen generations to Jesse, who is described as being foreordained (Isaiah 11:1). Jesse then sires King David and then twenty-six generations until the birth of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Luke 3:23–38 further traces that genealogical descent all the way back to Adam.
60. Stone, *The Family*, 135, 151.
61. Herlihy, “The Making,” 126.
62. Duby, *Medieval Marriage*, 9; Gies and Gies, *Marriage*, 126–28. See McDougall (“The Making”) for the strong collaboration between the Church and nobility in such marriages.
63. Le Goff, *The Birth*, 168–69, 303–4.
64. Hull and Bold, “Towards,” 6–7; Hull and Bold, “Hell,” 448, 462.
65. Le Goff, *The Birth*, 237–88.
66. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 12:575–80; *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 11:1034–39.
67. Le Goff, *The Birth*, 4–5, 11–12, 210–18, 293–94.

CHAPTER 12

1. See Hassig, *Mexico*.
2. Hassig, “Conquest.”
3. See Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange*; and Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism*.
4. Carrasco, “Indian-Spanish Marriages,” 89; Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange*.
5. Slicher van Bath, “The Calculation”; Cook and Borah, *Essays*, 80–82; Henige, *Numbers*; McCaa, “Spanish”; Sanders, “The Population,” 291; Zambardino, “Mexico’s Population.”
6. Gibson, *The Aztecs*, 448–49.
7. Black, “Why”; Bruce-Chwatt, “Paleogenesis,” 376; Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange*, 35–63; Joralemon, “New World”; McNeill, *Plagues*, 183–88.

8. Hassig, *Trade*, 180–83.
9. Betzig, “Medieval Monogamy,” 182.
10. Seed, *To Love*, 17.
11. Kellogg, *Weaving*, 72–73. See Kulcsár (“Something Old”) for a less extreme example of marriage practices following political change.
12. Greenleaf, *Zumárraga*, 107; Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition*, 100.
13. Greenleaf, *Zumárraga*, 107.
14. Encinas, *Cedulario*, 1:415–22; Greenleaf, *Zumárraga*, 107; *Recopilación*, 4:5–5v (lib. IX, tit. XXVI, leyes XXVIII and XXIX).
15. For example, McKinley, “Illicit Intimacies.”
16. Although this push for monogamy was the main trend, there was nevertheless a minor, countervailing one supported by millennialist clergy in Mexico in favor of marriage by priests and polygyny by Spanish colonists. Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 75.
17. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, 105.
18. Molina, *Confessionario*; Sahagún, *Primeros memoriales*, 1993, 27, 29, 31, 39; see also La Vera Cruz, *Speculum*.
19. Gibson, *The Aztecs*, 151; Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario*, 7:297, 11:161. Surprisingly, rates of abortion and infanticide throughout the viceregal period were high, but these actions largely went unpunished. Jaffary, “Reconceiving Motherhood.”
20. Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario*, 7:297.
21. Greenleaf, “The Inquisition,” 138; Greenleaf, “The Mexican Inquisition,” 315; Klor de Alva, “Colonizing Souls,” 10; Moreno de los Arcos, “New Spain’s Inquisition,” 28–29.
22. García Icazbalceta, *Nueva colección*, 280–89; Greenleaf, “The Inquisition,” 139; Greenleaf, “The Mexican Inquisition,” 324–25; Moreno de los Arcos, “New Spain’s Inquisition,” 29–31. I have used Nahuatl spellings for cities and towns of the pre-Conquest period but have used the often corrupt variants of names of the colonial period, hence the spelling of Tetzcooco as the colonial variant “Texcooco.” As a practical matter there is little overlap in the specific towns mentioned here, although I should note that I have used the colonial “Tacuba” for the pre-Columbian Tlacopan, which is not mentioned in the pre-Conquest portion of this book but whose fame requires me to mention the change.
23. Greenleaf, “The Inquisition,” 139–40; Moreno de los Arcos, “New Spain’s Inquisition,” 31.
24. Greenleaf, “The Inquisition,” 140–41; 1991:260–61; Moreno de los Arcos, “New Spain’s Inquisition,” 31.
25. Greenleaf, “The Mexican Inquisition,” 316; Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition*, 173–74; Moreno de los Arcos, “New Spain’s Inquisition,” 23.
26. Greenleaf, “The Mexican Inquisition,” 324.
27. *Ibid.*, 322; Klor de Alva, “Colonizing Souls,” 6–7.
28. Boyer, *Lives*, 7–9; Greenleaf, *Zumárraga*, 107–8; Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition*, 100.

29. Boyer, *Lives*, 31.
30. Ibid., 21; Laslett, "Introduction," 25; Seed, *To Love*, 63, 266–67n.
31. *Recopilación*, 2:188v (lib. VI, tit. I, ley IV).
32. Ibid. (lib. VI, tit. I, ley V); Gibson, *The Aztecs*, 151.
33. Gibson, *The Aztecs*, 151.
34. Seed, *To Love*, 17, 24–25.
35. Cancian, Goodman, and Smith, "Capitalism," 325; Cope, *The Limits*, 14–15; Gage, *Thomas Gage's Travels*, 67.
36. Carrasco, "Indian-Spanish Marriages," 90; Nutini, *The Wages*, 181.
37. Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario*, 3:137–44.
38. Carrasco, "Indian-Spanish Marriages," 88. There is a problem in these data, and it appears that in at least one case, the widower was actually a widow.
39. Greenleaf, *Zumárraga*, 107; Seed, *To Love*, 24.
40. Carrasco, "Indian-Spanish Marriages," 90–91; Vásquez de Espinosa, *Description*, 146–47.
41. Carrasco, "Indian-Spanish Marriages," 101–2; Nutini, *The Wages*, 181.
42. Carrasco, "Indian-Spanish Marriages," 89.
43. Ibid., 97–98.
44. *Códice Aubin*, fol. 45v; Medina Gonzalez, *Histoire mexicaine*, 16r; Mendieta, *Historia*, 1:180–84.
45. Motolinía, *Memoriales*, 97.
46. See Chipman's (*Moctezuma's Children*) study of marriages and inheritance by Moteuczoma Xocoyotl's descendants.
47. Alvarado Tezozómoc, "Códice Ramírez," 167.
48. Ibid., 161.
49. Vásquez de Espinosa, *Description*, 145.
50. Cortés, *Cartas*, 262–63.
51. Chipman, *Moctezuma's Children*, passim.
52. For example, Haskett, *Indigenous Rulers*, 40–41.
53. Gibson, *The Aztecs*, 36.
54. Carrasco, "Indian-Spanish Marriages," 92–93; Vásquez de Espinosa, *Description*, 145.
55. Motolinía, *Memoriales*, 97–99.
56. Carrasco, "Indian-Spanish Marriages," 91.
57. Ibid., 102.
58. Nutini, *The Wages*, 181.
59. Gage, *Thomas Gage's Travels*, 67.
60. Gibson, *The Aztecs*, 36.
61. Motolinía, *Memoriales*, 131.
62. The fragmentation of large households in the late pre-Hispanic era into smaller households that Kellogg ("Households," 490–91) interprets as a result of demographic decline may also be the result of the demise of polygynous households and the dropping of more peripheral members arising with monogamy.

63. For an excellent early example of such surnames among both nobles and commoners, see the *Matrícula de Huexotzingo*. See also Horn, "Gender."
64. See Acuña (*Relaciones*, 4:cuadro 12) for a depiction of Spanish friars burning Native ritual garb.
65. See Cline, *Colonial Culhuacan*; Horn, "Testaments"; Kellogg, "Aztec Inheritance"; Kellogg, *Law*, 125–29; Kellogg, "Indigenous Testaments"; Wood, "Matters"; Wood, "Testaments."

CHAPTER 13

1. For example, Brain, "The Natchez 'Paradox'"; Fischer, "Solutions"; Haas, "Natchez"; Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians*, 206–10; Mason, "Natchez"; Tooker, "Natchez."
2. Chase, "Elites," 37, 40, 44–46.
3. This explanation assumes that the widely perceived collapse of classic Maya cities actually occurred. After decades of unsatisfactory attempts to explain such a collapse, many Mayanists are now employing the age-old anthropological expedient not of achieving a better explanation, but of eliminating the problem entirely by defining it out of existence. In short, if they cannot account for something, anthropologists typically either drop the issue entirely or deny it ever existed, asserting that it was merely a misapprehension of the data.
4. Laslett, "Characteristics," 90.
5. See Ribordy ("The Two Paths," 329–30) for the medieval practice of marrying contrary to parental wishes, which included class exogamy.
6. Hajdu, "The Position," 124–25.
7. Duby, *Medieval Marriage*, 9–10; Herlihy, "The Making," 121–24.

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INDEX

Page numbers in italic text indicate illustrations.

- 8 Deer, 145
- Aatel, 26
- Acacitli, 27
- Acamapichtli, 6, 30, 32, 34, 57; ancestry, 25; death, 27; lineage, 38; offspring, 26–27; reign, 6; successors, 27, 30, 32, 34, 57; wives, 26–27
- Acazitli, 26
- Acolhua, 107; Spanish allies, 107–9
- Acolman, 107
- Acuña, René, 164n64
- adultery, 93–100, 114, 116; punishment, 94; redemption, 96
- Ahuexotl, 26
- ahuiameque, 91. *See also* prostitutes
- Ahuitzotl, 6–7, 45–47, 52, 56; ancestry, 6; cohort, 54–56, 108; death, 45–46, 55, 58; lineage, 52, 57, 108, 133; reign, 7; successors, 6, 55, 57, 108
- alliances, 26, 30, 34, 38, 40–41, 53, 58, 99, 103–4, 106–10
- Alonso X (el Sabio), 150n34
- Ameca, 94
- Ana, 135
- annal, 2
- Antilles, 131
- Apan, 34
- Arabs, 20, 94
- assassinations, 29–30, 33, 45–46, 49, 55, 110
- Atotonilco, 34, 157n16
- Atotoztli, 25, 43
- Axayacatl, 2, 43, 57, 99, 108, 133; ancestry, 6, 43; cohort, 54–56, 58, 108; death, 54, 99; lineage, 52; offspring, 108; reign, 6, 99; successors, 59
- Ayauhcihuatl, 27–29
- Azcapotzalco, 5, 26–29, 94
- Aztacoatl, 28, 34
- Aztecs: historical importance, 3–4; mythical origin, 4
- Aztlan, 4, 102; legend, 42
- Babylonia, 20, 94
- Bedouins, 19, 21, 155n19
- Betzig, Laura, 22, 126, 156n33
- bigamy, 116, 128–29
- books, 1
- Borah, Woodrow, 125
- Boyer, Richard, 160n16
- bride capture, 20
- bride price, 13
- Cacama, 107
- cacique, 128–29, 131, 135
- calendar, 39–49; change, 153n46
- calmecac, 73, 78, 137
- Calnek, Edward, 154n3
- calpoleque, 10. *See also* calpolli heads
- calpolli, 10, 26, 34, 77, 82–84, 86–88
- calpolli heads, 26
- Carlos, 128
- Carrasco, Pedro, 40, 64, 130
- Caso, Alfonso, 71, 85–87
- Cempoallan, 105
- cenogamy, 12
- Chalchiuhnenetzin, 91
- Chalchiuhtlatonac, 34
- Chalco, 135
- Charlemagne, 90, 118
- Chase, Arlen, 144
- Chicoloapa, 150n37

- Chicomoztoc, 4
 child betrothal, 13, 20
 Chimalpopoca, 6, 27; ancestry, 6, 28, 33; death, 6, 29–31, 33, 46–49; lineage, 31–32; offspring, 29; reign, 6; successors, 6, 32–33; wives, 28
 China, 13, 41, 76, 155n8, 158n36
 chinampas, 5, 88
 Chipman, Donald E., 163n46
 Cholollan, 106
 cihuatlanque, 12. *See also* marriage brokers
 Citlalcoatl, 28, 34
 clans, 10, 42
 classes, 4–5, 26, 64, 69–70, 76, 81, 131, 136; and adultery, 95–96; Aztec, 9–10, 61–62; endogamous, 72, 74, 125, 130, 139, 145–46, 164n5; exogamous, 79, 164n5; and marriage, 9, 12; Maya, 144; mobility, 73–74, 77–80, 139, 144; property, 85–90; size, 62–64, 71–72, 134–35; and sumptuary laws, 76; surnames, 120; and wealth, 139
 Coanacoch, 132–33
 Coast, Ernestina, 151n1
 Coatlican, 28
 Codex Aubin, 4
 Codex Boturini, 4
 Codex Telleriano-Remensis, 94
 codices, 1, 7, 35
 cohorts, 47–59, 50, 51; and the Conquest, 110; and marital ties, 101; new, 75; shifts, 104; and succession, 145
 Colhua, 27–28, 32
 Colhuacan, 4, 25–26, 42
 concubines, 41–42; and the Catholic Church, 113, 115–16, 118–19, 155n7; in China, 155n8; as mothers, 64; Spaniards taking, 127
 Confessionario mayor, 128
 Conquest of Mexico, 105–10, 123–28
 conversions, 1, 135–36
 Cook, Sherburne F., 125
 Córdoba, Francisco Hernández de, 123
 Cortés, Antonio, 131
 Cortés, Hernán, 82, 106–7, 123, 133; and Cholollan, 106; and Cuauhtemoc, 46, 57, 133; and Ixtlilxochitl, 107; and Moteuczoma Xocoyotl, 56, 106; and Tlaxcaltecs, 56, 109
 Cortés Chimalpopoca, María Jacinta, 135
 Counter-Reformation, 117
 craftsmen, 10
 Cristina, 135
 Crone, Patricia, 62
 Crónica X, 3, 149n1
 Crosby, Alfred, 125
 Cuacuauhpitzahuac, 28
 Cuatlecoatl, 26
 Cuauhnahuac, 27, 43
 cuauhipiltin, 44, 86
 Cuauhtemoc, 108, 110; ancestry, 6, 57; cohort, 132–33; death, 46, 57; lineage, 133; reign, 7, 57; successors, 132; wives, 133
 cuauhtlatoani, 109. *See also* governor
 Cuauhtlecoatl, 34
 Cuauhtloqueztli, 27
 Cuauhtzimitzin, 28–29, 34
 Cuitlahua, 6–7, 28, 57, 107, 133, 135; ancestry, 6, 59; cohort, 56–57, 108; death, 46, 56, 108; lineage, 108, 133; offspring, 133; reign, 7; successors, 57, 108, 132–33; wives, 38, 56
 depopulation, 110, 125–26, 140
 Dewald, Jonathan, 155n6
 Divine Colhuacan, 42
 divorce, 22, 70, 95, 114; and Christianity, 114–15, 118, 126; Aztec, 14, 17, 70, 150n34
 dowry, 13, 123, 125
 Durán, Diego, 14
 dynasties, 7, 30–31, 88, 145, 147
 Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, 158n36
 Egypt, 20, 94
 elites, 38, 128, 144–45; change of, 146; church and, 126, 136, 139; loss of status, 73–74, 105; and marital ties, 40; size, 63–64, 154–55n5, 155n6
 emperors, 6, 33, 46, 56, 87, 131
 Epcatl, 26, 28, 34
 family size, 16, 65

- fertility, 81–82, 156n33; and class, 72;
 declining, 51; and monogamy, 68; and
 polygyny, 65, 67–68, 155n14
 festivals, 2, 93, 96, 98
 first wives, 119; and birth intervals, 66–67;
 post-conquest, 136–37; and reproduc-
 tion, 21, 65, 118, 121
 flower war, 44
 France, 118, 153n43
 Franciscans, 128, 131
- Genghis Khan, 61
 Gies, Francis, 160n44
 Gies, Joseph, 160n49
 Goody, Jack, 46, 89, 118, 120–21
 governor, 6, 109
 Grande, Juan, 135
 Gregorian reforms, 115
 Gregory of Tours, 153n43
 Grijalva, Juan de, 123
 Guatemala, 45
- Hardoy, Jorge, 154n3
 harems, 67, 100, 158n36
 hegemony, 39, 47
 Hicks, Frederic, 62–63
 Hindu, 41
 Holy Office of the Inquisition, 129
 Huehue Cuitlahuatzin, 28, 34
 Huehue Tezozomoczin, 34
 Huehue Zaca, 28, 34
 Huexotzincatzin, 95
 Huexotzinco, 44
 Huitzililhuitl, 30; ancestry, 6, 26–27, 59;
 death, 28; lineage, 32, 38; offspring,
 28; reign, 6; successors, 28, 34–35, 52,
 57; wives, 28
 Huitzilopochtli, 4, 13, 42, 92
 Huitzimengari, Constantino, 131
 Huitzimengari, Pablo, 131
 hyperpolygyny, 40–41, 48, 81–82
- Ihuitl-Temoc, 25–26
 Ilancueitl, 25–27
 infanticide, 13, 19, 162n19
 infidelity, 67, 98
 inheritance, 85–90, 118, 132; and the
 Church, 112–15, 120; and family types,
 89; impartible, 87–88, 119, 146; offices,
 30; partible, 87–88, 119; personalty, 10;
 post-conquest, 132, 138–39; realty, 9;
 usufruct, 12
 inquisition, 116, 123, 128–29. *See also* Holy
 Office of the Inquisition
 intermarriage, 79, 127, 134; class, 70, 74,
 144; intercity elites, 25, 40, 103, 109,
 143; Spanish, 105, 130–31, 135–36
 Ires, Rodrigo, 135
 Islam, 94
 Israel, 20, 41
 Itzcoatl, 7, 29–35, 39, 46, 49, 54, 57,
 157n16; ancestry, 27, 32, 34; death, 34;
 lineage, 34–35, 55; offspring, 35; regent,
 29–32, 35; reign, 6; successors, 31, 35,
 43, 59; wives, 35
 Ixcoman, 29
 Ixtacmixcoatzin, 34
 Ixtlapalapan, 28, 34, 45, 55
 Ixtlilxochitl, 107–9
- Japan, 62
 Jesus, 111, 120, 161n39
 Jewish society, 112
- Kellogg, Susan, 163n62
 kingdoms, 5, 45, 143; tributary, 40, 103;
 women's roles, 7
 kin links, 75, 80, 103, 108
 kinship, 25, 32, 40, 104, 110; Church, 132;
 and class, 4, 5; and inheritance, 89;
 and the noble, 75; and residence, 17
 Korea, 154n73
 Kulcsár, Lázsló J., 162n11
- lands, 9–10
 Las Siete Partidas, 116
 leading man, 14–15, 80
 Leyes de Toro, 114
 lineages, 12, 34–35, 58, 119–20, 157n16; and
 daughters, 40, 101, 103; and inheri-
 tance, 87; maternal, 25, 32, 36–37, 48;
 paternal, 32, 48; post-
 conquest, 133; shift, 38, 49, 54–55, 57,
 106

- lords, 9–10, 47–48, 88–89; garb, 38;
 kin ties, 50, 52, 59, 75, 78, 138; post-
 conquest, 134
 lords' houses, 9–10, 35, 48–49, 76, 134

 macehualtin, 10
 Magdalena de Mendoza, 135
 Mapa Quinatzin, 94
 María, Agata, 135
 marriage, 9–17; age, 16–17, 157n19;
 ceremonies, 14–16, 15; practices, xii,
 11–13, 162n16; as a sacrament, 114, 116,
 160n16
 marriage brokers, 12, 14–15
 Martín, 131
 Mary, 120; descent, 161n19, 161n59
 Matlatlan, 129
 Matricula de Huexotzinco, 154–55n5
 matrikin, 52, 59, 104; increased impor-
 tance, 36–38; post-Conquest, 138
 matriline, 36–37, 48, 53, 78; post-conquest,
 119, 138–39
 Maxihuatzin, 29
 Maxtlatl, 29, 31, 33, 46, 146
 Maya, 105, 143; collapse, 144, 164n3
 mayequé, 10
 McDougall, Sara, 161n62
 mestizos, 130
 Mexico, 42
 Mexico, population, 125
 Michoacan, 135
 Middle East, 67
 migration, 82; and sex ratio, 19, 84;
 Spanish, 126–27; into Tenochtitlan,
 82–84. *See also* Aztlan
 Miquitzin, 29
 Misantla, 93
 mobility, 142; downward, 103, 134, 138
 monogamy, 13, 19, 21–22, 48, 64–70,
 79; and adultery, 93, 96–97; and
 concubinage, 41; and dowry, 13; and
 Mormons, 20, 155n15, 155n17, 156n24;
 and reproduction, 21, 65; in Europe,
 111–22; post-conquest, 122, 126–40, 146
 Moteuczoma, Diego Luis, 131
 Moteuczoma Ilhuicamina, 6, 36, 47, 56,
 58; ancestry, 28, 34–35, 52, 59; cohort,
 52–54; death, 43, 55–56; offspring, 43;
 reign, 6; social changes, 38–39, 42, 56,
 72, 79, 93; successors, 43, 57
 Moteuczoma Xocoyotl, 7, 52, 57, 59, 95,
 102, 106–8, 131, 163n56; ancestry, 6,
 59; cohort, 52, 56–57, 108; death, 46,
 55, 106; offspring, 132–33; offspring
 legitimacy after the Conquest, 134–34;
 reign, 7; social changes, 38–39, 41–42,
 55–56, 79–80, 102; successors, 57, 107
 Motolinía, 131

 Nag, Moni, 155n14
 Narváz, Panfilo de, 107
 Nayar, 12
 Nezahualcoyotl, 96
 Nezahualpilli, 40, 95, 98–100; death, 107;
 offspring, 65, 68; reign, 22, 99; succes-
 sors, 107; wives, 22, 40, 93
 Nezahualtecolotzin, Martín, 131
 nobles, 9–10. *See also* elites
 noble lands, 77, 88
 Nopaltzin, 95

 Oaxaca, 143, 145, 161n58
 Ocelopan, 26
 Opochtli Itzlahuatzin, 25
 Oxitipan, 135
 Oztuma, 95

 paganism, 129–30
 paramours, 14, 64, 95, 98–99
 paternity, 36, 41–42, 101
 patriline, post-Conquest, 138
 personalty, 10, 87, 89, 138
 pilalli, 10. *See also* noble lands
 Pimentel, Hernando, 131
 pipiltin, 9–10, 44. *See also* nobles
 polyandry, 12–13
 polygamy, 12–13
 polygyny, 12–13, 36; and chiefdoms, 143–
 44; and economics, 22; and expan-
 sion, 40–41; impact on commoners,
 72–74; origins, 20; and politics, 22–23;
 and prestige, 21
 Pomar, Juan Bautista, 99
 porters, 39

- Potonchan, 105
 priests: Aztec, 96, 98, 130, 137; as chroniclers, 1, 14, 64; and social mobility, 73–74, 88; Spanish, 112–17, 119, 122, 131, 135
 property. *See* personalty; realty
 prostitutes, 64, 91–92, 95
 Protestant Reformation, 115, 117, 127
 Provisor of Natives, 129
 Psalmodia christiana, 128
 purgatory, 121
- queen-mothers, 37, 100
 queens, 6, 7, 48, 54, 143
 Quetzalcuauhtzin, 29
- rape, 97
 realty, 9, 77, 85–87; and inheritance, 89–90, 119; post-conquest, 138–39
 regents, 29–35
 reigns, 5–7, 58, 101–2; lengths, 53–55
 remarriage: after divorce, 70; under Spanish law, 116, 133–34, 137; by widows, 69–70
 reproduction, 19, 21, 23, 61, 74, 82; rates, 63–68, 84
 residence, 67, 163n62
 Ribordy, Geneviève, 164n5
 Roman Catholic Church: doctrine, 111–16; councils, 115–17, 194; and extirpation of native religion, 164n; and marriages, 111, 118–19, 122, 126–28, 131–32, 146, 161n62; and regulation of sexual practices, 112–15; and wealth, 118–21
 Roman law, 112
 royal ancestry, 25, 27
 royal succession: direct, 6, 31–32; by election, 32–33, 35–37, 46–50
- sacrifice, human, 10, 92, 98, 123
 Sahagún, Bernardino de, 3, 14, 17, 64, 91, 96, 128, 155n7
 schools. *See* calmecac; telpochcalli
 sex ratios, 19–20; at birth, 21, 66; class, 69, 71–72; elites, 62–64; post-conquest, 126–27
 sexual intercourse, 21, 66–67, 93, 98, 114
 sexual prohibitions, 21
 Shipibo, 66
 Sjöberg, Gideon, 62
 slaves, 10, 20, 41, 92, 115
 smallpox, 6, 46, 56–57, 106, 110
 social mobility, 44, 73, 98; demise of upward mobility, 139–40, 142–44, 146; downward, 71–84; upward, 71–84, 155n8
 social organization, xi–xii; Aztec, 9, 11; colonial, 137
 sociobiology, 22–23, 65, 156n33
 sodomy, 128
 Spain, 76, 114, 116–17, 119, 123–31
 Stone of Tizoc, 44
 Sub-Saharan Africa, 20
 sumptuary laws, 38, 62, 76, 89
 surnames, 120, 137, 139, 164n63
 Syria, 20
- Tacuba, 131, 135, 162n22
 Tapia, Hernando de, 131
 Tapia Motelchiuhtzin, Andrés de, 131
 Tarascan empire, 43, 131
 Tariacuri, Francisco, 131
 Tayauh, 29, 46
 Tecamachalco, 131
 Tehuantepec, Isthmus of, 125
 telpochcalli, 42, 44, 78
 telpochtlatlo, 15. *See also* leading man
 Tenayuca, 135
 Tenoch, 26
 Tenochtitlan: conquest of, 57, 106–23; migration to, 82–84; origin, 4–5, 26; population, 62–68, 82, 154n3
 Teotihuacan, 135, 145
 Teotlatlahqui, 28
 Tepanec empire, 3–6, 27, 29, 33–35, 46, 145; overthrow, 5; succession struggle, 29, 33
 Tetela, 95
 Teteo Innan, 92
 teteuctin, 9. *See also* lords
 Tetzco, 6; adulterers, 99–100; lords, 49; succession, 107
 teuccaleque, 9

- teuccalli, 9, 87. *See also* lords' houses
 teuctlalli, 86
 Teutila, 135
 Tezacatet, 26
 Tezozomoc (Aztec lord), 43
 Tezozomoc (Tepanec emperor), 33, 46,
 145; death, 29; offspring, 27–28, 29;
 successors, 29
 Tiacapan, Inés, 135
 Tihuacan, 135
 Tiliuhcan Tlacopan, 27–28
 Titici, 16
 Tizoc, 6, 44–45, 99; ancestry, 43; cohort,
 52, 54–55; death, 45, 46; lineage, 55, 58;
 reign, 6, 44, 45; social changes, 44, 79;
 successors, 45
 Tlacacohtoc, 26
 Tlacaoel, 3, 28, 34
 Tlakahuepan, 26, 34,
 Tlakahuepantzin, Pedro, 131
 tlacatecatl, 30, 34
 Tlaccacochto, 28
 tlacochcalatl, 34
 Tlacopan, 6, 132–33, 135, 162n22
 Tlacotepec, 93
 tlalmaitin, 10
 Tlalocan, 98
 tlammemes, 39
 Tlatelolco, 28, 135
 tlatlacotin, 10. *See also* slaves
 Tlatolzac, 34
 tlatoque, 9
 Tlaxcallan, 95, 106–7
 Tlaxcaltecs, Spanish allies, 56, 105–9, 123
 tonalpohualli, 96
 Totonacs, 105
 Toyaotlancatzin, 28
 Tree of Jesse, 120, 161n58, 161n59
 tribute, calpolli, 26; commoner
 household, 16, 26; disruption, 45;
 effect on tributaries, 103; imperial,
 5, 35, 39, 83, 87; to lords, 9; post-
 conquest, 134; stymied, 4–5
 Tswana, 153n45
 tzompantli, 34
 usufruct, 11, 75, 85–86, 88
 Valley of Mexico: Aztec entry, 4, 42;
 economic reorganization, 5, 83–84;
 population, 62–63, 82
 Velásquez de Cuéllar, Diego, 123
 Verdugo Ixtlilxochitl, Francisca, 135
 Virgins: and Aztec marriage, 14, 64; and
 Catholicism, 112, 114–15
 Visigoth law, 119
 wards, 10, 42, 73, 82, 86. *See also* calpolli
 Warren, Dave, 154–55n5
 West Indies, 124, 127, 135
 widows, remarriage, 69
 wives, influence, 52
 women, unrecognized importance in
 Aztec society, 7, 9
 writing: Aztec, 1–2; Latin script, 2–3
 Xiconoc, 28, 34
 Xihuitl-Temoc (king of Colhuacan), 25
 Xihuitl-Temoc (son of Chimalpopoca),
 29, 32–33; ancestry, 29; reign, 31–32
 Xilotepec, 34
 Xolotl, 95
 Yaocihuatl, 28
 Yohualpopocatzin, 29
 Zorita, Alonso de, 16–17, 31, 150n34
 Zumárraga, Juan de, 128–29



This provocative examination of Aztec marriage practices offers a powerful analysis of the dynamics of society and politics in Mexico before and after the Spanish conquest. The author explores how the practice of polygyny, a type of plural marriage in which men had multiple wives, resulted in a society far more fluid than earlier scholars have understood. Polygyny provided Aztec women with opportunities for upward social mobility. It also led to increased migration to Tenochtitlan and influenced royal succession, which helped to unite the empire. Hassig's analysis sheds new light on the conquest, showing that the imposition of monogamy—rather than military might, as earlier scholars have assumed—was largely responsible for the strong and rapid rise of Spanish influence on Aztec society. The changes that happened in Europe over the course of a millennium, the Aztecs experienced in a single generation.

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UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS
unmpress.com • 800-249-7737

ISBN 978-0-8263-5712-0

